The background is a vibrant, abstract composition. It features large, stylized palm fronds in shades of teal and yellow against a light pink background. In the upper right corner, there is a white silhouette of a person's head and shoulders, facing left. The overall aesthetic is modern and tropical.

KHABAR KESLAN

Issue 4:  
***EDGE***





Original artwork for Khabar Keslan by Salma Noor

# EDITOR'S NOTE

As a child, I rarely found solace in my difference; mainly solitude. I, like many, am muhajun (مهاجر). Masked by the foliage of accents, slang, body language, and adab, I have had to learn how to navigate the environments around me. But at what cost?

In our previous issue, we probed the constitution of identity. To what extent are our subjectivities and relationships formed by the governing structures we exist within? What about the food we eat or the layout of the geography? By focusing on points of overlap, we necessarily investigate parts that don't; the contours, the limits, the boundaries of any form of distinction, institutionalized or not.

EDGE was thus born out of the ambiguous relationship between representation and precarity. Does more visibility make the marginalized more vulnerable? How do we describe the relationship between the periphery and center? Can they exist independently? We began without always knowing the question, but guided by our memories, observations, crossing of boundaries, cultural, emotional, gendered, national, religious.

Khurasan, a cultural and intellectual hub during the Islamic golden age, was divvied up and appropriated by proceeding powers into the complex fringe it is today. Yerevan, which has grappled most recently with visibility, became home to a protest movement engendering Armenian art around the globe. And Fairbanks, the edge of the world, is home to a small community of Kurds from Faraman who escaped persecution—and an unorthodox meeting point for an Iranian academic to reconnect with his childhood.

The contributors to this fifth issue reach beyond the center to examine the divided, the contained, and the container. They delve into times of transition, and the risks that follow it. They reveal the hardships that come with the margins, and the strength that accompanies such struggle. They show that we meander through memory and home—fluid experiences engendered by colors, cloth, coins: sensations with which to approach the peripheral perspective. Most importantly, they demonstrate that familiarity with the edge unlocks a power of its own: we are our own centers.



Original artwork by  
Salma Noor

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# ATOPIA: THE MIND IN WINTER

*Darius Rejali*

May 31, 2002  
Fairbanks, Alaska

*It's an uncertain day, the kind where you wonder, did I stay in this city a little too long? Have I done everything that can be done in Fairbanks?*

\*

I'd come to Alaska to spend time with my former research assistant, Chad, his girlfriend, Lindsay, and his family outside of Fairbanks. We had spent some days near Johnson River, deep in the wilderness outside of Delta. Now I'm back in Fairbanks getting ready for my train journey south to hike alone in Denali for a few days, and then head down to Anchorage.

I decide to walk to Fred Meyers and catch the bus downtown. I don't know what to do except snap photos and mail a postcard to my barber, who wants one from Nowhere. The previous day, I had traveled down the Haul Road from the Arctic Circle. That was pretty close.

Standing in line at the post office, a woman on the far left-hand counter is having an animated conversation with the clerk. "No, ma'am," they say, "when you became a naturalized American citizen, you gave up your Iranian passport. You cannot renew it." Why would this woman go to a U.S. post office for information about passports, especially renewing Iranian ones? I was intrigued.

At any rate, the information the clerk gives is mistaken, so as she is leaving I say, "Bebakhshid."



She replies, “*Salaam*, you are Iranian?”

And I say yes.

“How come I don’t know about you? There are fourteen Iranians in Fairbanks.”

“I’m just visiting.” I tell her. “But I wanted to say that the information the clerk gave you is mistaken. I can tell you how to renew your Iranian passport; perhaps we can sit down somewhere and I can explain.”

“So much to do, so many errands, I only get one day off... I will stand in line with you till you mail, then you come with me while I do errands and explain how I do this.”

Her name is Guli, which, in Farsi, means the color rose. She is a very short, dark-haired woman with a weathered face, easily confused, flustered, and disorganized; her intensity resolves into patterns that I can follow. We get into her big American car, and she drives in a jerky, dangerous way, halting frequently in the middle of the street, getting confused and lost on the one-ways as she peers over the steering wheel. I’ve seen this kind of bad driving all over Fairbanks—that slow lumbering, like many pack mules trying to find their way through a market. I watch the giant car trundle through a red light. Amazingly, nothing is hit. She explains to me as she is driving: she is from Kermanshah and she is a Kurd.

“Forgive my Farsi, it is only book Farsi,” she says, “And your English is so good, no accent.”

My mother is American.

“How come I don’t know about you? I know all the Iranians. There’s the doctor

and his wife. I met them once but don’t see them much. And then there’s Mehrzad—he had Baha written on his T-shirt; we were at the McDonald’s, and my husband Joe said, ‘He’s Iranian,’ and I said, ‘No, that is not possible,’ but I went up and asked in Farsi and he was! And they do a lot of favors for me. Life is so hard here, and it is so expensive. Joe has a good job, and I work, but still. And my son is driving me crazy. Doesn’t want to go to college, only thinks of sports! My daughter, thankfully, is better. I have to stop here to do something for her.”

She drives to a clinic, and I wait. “Where do you want to go?” she then says, even though I’d already explained how to renew her passport while we were in the car.

I say, “The train station.” Although I’ve already confirmed my ticket to Denali, I think this will be a graceful way to exit. I want to just walk around town on my own, per my original plan.

“I will take you there, no, and then we must have lunch. I don’t know where to have lunch here, though. What do you know?” As if I would know anything. I’m directing her but she seems completely adrift in these simple city streets. When I guide her to the train parking lot, she exclaims, “Through that mud? No! It is over there.”

But it is not, and we have to go around the building, slogging through the mud, to get in.

Lunch is inevitable, and I need to reduce Guli’s uncertainty about what to do with me. I suggest we park on 2nd and find a place. Watching her search for a space is awful enough, but fortunately we end up exactly where my friend Chad and I had

parked the week before to eat at Lavelle’s. This was familiar to me. She wants me to find the Thai restaurant: “The rice was so GOOD!” I suggest we ask at Lavelle’s for an address. But, when we walk in and she realizes Lavelle’s is an “all you can eat” buffet, she says, “NOOO, we eat here.”

She leaves me to deal with the details. We find a table. She dashes off, “*Noon bokhor*,” she keeps saying, “It’s good for you.” I don’t eat bread, I say. She is shocked. Like an old *naneh*, she keeps pushing the heavy carbs, but desists when I decline repeatedly.

She then puts her hands together over the food and prays. “I’m *Massihi*,” she says, looking me straight in the eyes. “I was raised by *missionnaires*,” she says using Farsified French.

I recognize the gesture viscerally. Hands pressed together, that was... chapel! We sat on long wooden pews by classroom and grade (second grade was in the back) and sang “Onward Christian soldiers!” putting our emphasis heavily on the *CHRIS*. We loved that song when it came up in service. One day, my friend Stephen Dooraan came up to me in the yard—we had no lunch room, just a big cement space with trees—and said, “Darius, I love playing with you, but I would love you much more if you were a Christian.” It was said innocently, and I never thought it changed us. But until that day, I hadn’t known what I wasn’t. I hadn’t realized that I was something else, a Muslim, and that I would spend a lifetime trying to figure out what that meant to me.

Guli invokes a time when things had been simpler, a dawning recognition in me of a long-lasting curiosity towards difference, born out of love and respect. I return to

the present, nod, and ask, What kind of Massihi? “Presbyterian.” Who were the missionaries? Do you remember the names? “Oh yes, Korlee, Dooraan, Slowterr.”

Is she listing off the playmates of my childhood? Startled, I ask, “You mean Tim Korlee, Stephen Dooraan, Rhonda Slowterr?”

“Those were their children,” she says, but their parents had other names, which I did not recognize. She is from an older generation. My friends are all babies to her.

Of all three missionary families, I knew the Dooraans best; Stephen and I were playmates for many years. In 1974, he invited me to join his family and another classmate, Tim, and his sister on a trip to Kurdistan over No Ruz holidays. I was fifteen, and it was my first big trip away from home.

On our way, we stopped in Hamedan and visited the tomb of Esther. This was not just tourism, but also history and Bible study. The Rabbi led us deep into the old building and showed us a beautifully illuminated Persian Torah. Later, we ate at a *chelokababi* on the second floor of a worn building, overlooking a crowded intersection. Once the man who took our orders looked at me uncomprehendingly, I discovered that asking for a raw egg with the rice was a Tehrani custom. I was not in the same Iran I knew; I was out of place. Afterwards, we went up into the wilds, to Faraman, a Kurdish village, which had a mission, up in the Zagros.

I say to Guli that I had once travelled with the Dooraans to a village outside Kermanshah where there were Kurdish converts. How



many Kurdish Presbyterians are there in this world? I don't pause to wonder—her face lights up: "You went to *our* village!" She explains, "There were fifty of us, and the missionaries took care of us."

Another lost memory from the trip: there was an old woman in a room and she was the last caretaker living in this long white building. She wore her *roosari* tightly; she was full of kindness, but childlike, not maternal. We sat around her *sofreh*, prayed together, and ate. The building was an Iran I knew from Community School, the Presbyterian school where I studied in Tehran, familiar to me from childhood: space and order—doors of independent rooms opening outwards onto a porch, mixed with crisp plaster and missionary overtones. White gleam, old, wooden Iranian windowpanes; nothing very ornate, just the clarity of light as winter receded.

How many days were we there? One afternoon, we walked along a river. It was early springtime. The water was swift and

cold from the melting snow on the high Zagros. Unfamiliar green weeds were growing along the banks—not like those I knew from the summers at the Caspian—but the willows, thorns, and poplar trees were familiar enough.

In all the years after I left, one of my favorite photos of Iran was taken on that trip when Tim's sister and I stopped at a rock and looked upstream toward the Iraqi frontier—or so I imagine it to this day. Stephen snapped the shot just as Tim came running down the hill and accidentally stuck his foot into the photo. "Watch out for scorpions!" Stephen yelled, and we all looked at the ground. I remember the feeling I had when the shutter clicked, the beginning of... Well, something larger than me. A trip away from family, on my own, not unlike what I am doing in Alaska—the first step away.

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Although I didn't know it at the time, or even as I talk to Guli decades later, Faraman

was a village of orphans dating back to World War I when Turkish, Russian, and British troops had marched through the region. People forget the British marched right through the Zagros up to Baku, where today there is a British military cemetery for those who died in Dunsterforce. In the chaos, parents died and their children were left. Two Presbyterian missionaries, Francis and Blanche Wilson Stead, started the orphanage work; he was a minister and she was a doctor. In the years that followed, other mission organizations sent families, including the Korreles and Doorraans. "They would take turns coming," Guli explains over lunch.

She is really pleased I have been to her village. She knows Community School, but she's never been there. She had gone from Faraman to Pakistan, to a Presbyterian nursing school outside of Lahore. And then, back in Tehran, she met Joe. "Will you marry and live in the woods with me?" he had asked her. She didn't think he was joking; she just didn't know what that meant. But

she was a country girl, and said yes. After a short time in Saudi Arabia, they moved to Wisconsin. And then he got a good job at the physical plant in University of Alaska Fairbanks. So they came here.

"I want to go back. What is it like for Christians or those who marry Westerners?"

I tell her the facts.

"My sister wants me to go, she has her papers, but she didn't put down Massihi on her passport, she declared herself Muslim. If it is that way, I will never go. Has to be Massihi!"

She scribbles out a check for the two of us, but it is short. "I have to go," she says. Lunch is 12.95 each, so in her head that's 24 dollars. "*Teep nadi*," she declares, and dashes out. I round off the bill and give a tip anyway.

So here, at the end of the world, I meet, on my last day in Fairbanks, not just one





of fourteen Iranians in the city, not just a whirlwind of a Kurdish Iranian, but one of the fifty Christian Kurds who, from a world away, shares my childhood.

I feel unsteady and I need an anchor. I snap a photo of this table. I've travelled circles within circles—dining at the place I first ate when I came to Fairbanks with Chad; starting in English then drifting into Farsi and then suddenly back in English; arriving by train to central Alaska, then drifting in memory to Kurdistan on the Iranian frontier, and then back to central Alaska to train down to Denali.

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This tale first found its way to Guli's brother through a chain of storytellers. I told it to another old school friend, Stewart, who then told his parents—both Presbyterian ministers—who told others later that year during a denominational meeting in Cyprus, one of whom was Mr. Estaidi, who said, "Yes, I know her. She's my sister." He lived in British Columbia, just across the border from Idaho. All the orphans of Faraman took the last name Estaidi out of love and respect for Francis and Blanche Stead. They grew up together and regarded each other as brothers and sisters. Dr. Stead died in 1921 or 1922, and her husband left the service of the Presbyterian mission in 1924.

Most of what we know of their village comes from two books. In one, *The American Presbyterian Mission to Iran, 1854-1960*, John Elder writes:

*When the [First World] war broke out, Kermanshah was successively occupied by Turkish, Russian, and British troops. In her little hospital, [Dr. Stead] had often cared for men wounded in tribal warfare... But she cheerfully cared for the sick and wounded of the three armies of occupation and won the undying love of many soldiers. In addition, Mr. and Mrs.*

*Stead first opened their home to care for Kurdish and other orphan waifs from the street, and as the number increased, they erected a special building for their care, where they housed some sixty orphan children, supporting them by special funds solicited from abroad.*

And then there's the other book, *To Persia, with Love: An American Woman's Memoirs of Her Time in Iran*, in which Doreen Corley writes:

*As [Francis Stead] traveled from village to village, he became disturbed by the huge number of orphans he noticed. Because the [Presbyterian] mission that supported him did not do orphanage work, he eventually left that ministry in order to buy the land where Faraman was currently located and develop it into a village of sorts, hiring farmers from the surrounding villages to work the land.*

Guli did not learn Farsi, and did not need to, as the Bible had been translated to Kurdish a century ago. Stewart, too, took the Kurdish Bible as a basic fact of life—like the nastaliq Farsi poetry and calligraphy that he practices daily. His father once told me that Ivanis Izz al-Din translated the Gospels into Farsi in the 13th or 14th century, but the diatessaron of Ivanis was superseded by the "Bruce Bible," translated by the Irish missionary Robert Bruce in the late 19th century and published in 1895. It was the standard translation used by Iranian Christians and Jews for most of the twentieth century, and it's still preferred by many Christians of Guli's generation.

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When I put Guli's story forward for publication, once again, as it touched the real world, more bits of history came tumbling back, stirring things that had not been disturbed for many decades, reconnecting me to the world of my childhood. Toward the end of high school, Stephen Dooraan

and I drifted apart, but I find, years later, I have unknowingly memorized by heart the striking poem he wrote for his senior year photograph: "I am what I am, and I'll be what I'll be, so leave me alone and let me be me." His own words or someone else's poem—I'm not sure. But the candor he showed on the playground when we were eight hadn't left him. Like me, he was on a voyage of self-discovery of an intense sort—so his judgments of others, myself included, were always sincere, I'm sure.

We completely lost contact when we came to the United States to pursue our studies, and, I'm not sure why, but at some point I thought I had heard that he had died of AIDs in the 1980s. So when he didn't show up at school reunions, I didn't inquire and no one said anything.

A classmate reported Stephen was alive and living in Tampa. Stephen apparently remembered the river of Faraman, where he spent many hours swimming and avoiding snakes. His wife is American, but she makes a mean *ghormeh sabzi*. He added in an email to my classmate:

*"I remember Darius' fascination with runes and Lord of the Rings stuff. I know in high school I was not that close to him—but we were always friendly and cordial. I did feel he had withdrawn, too. But I am not sure why. I do need to reply to him, but for the time being, my parents are back from Florida for several weeks, and I will be subjected to many hours of Fox News, O'Reilly Factor, and, if I'm really good, Turkish soap operas, which are all the rage these days. Ahura Mazda, please help me."*

My classmate observed, "Stephen seems to be a man of few words and somewhat guarded. Understandable." Just like Guli, Stephen "often thinks about Iran, and would like to revisit, but is somewhat apprehensive. Again, understandable." This classmate was partly Baha'i; he didn't need to say more.

Years after the revolution, in 2001, while traveling with my cousin back from visiting our ancestral village of Tafresh, I pushed my cousin to stop in Hamedan so I could visit Esther's tomb again. It didn't look anything like I remembered when I had come with the Dooraans. The ancient Torah, if it was still there, was in a place no one could remember. The old days were gone. Things, I guess, change—indeed, in this world, there is nothing more certain—but here, in Stephen, was still the same intensity I remember. One day he will write, and we will visit Faraman again together. Like me, change hasn't dampened his spirit; it has just made him wonder more. ☹

**Darius Rejali**, professor of political science at Reed College, is a nationally recognized expert on government torture and interrogation. Iranian-born, Rejali has spent his scholarly career reflecting on violence, and, specifically, reflecting on the causes, consequences, and meaning of modern torture in our world.





Gideon Appah, *Nsuteen Buom (A River with a Room)*, 2017, mixed media (acrylics, wax, photographs) on canvas, 140 cm x 183 cm

## MEMOIRS THROUGH POKUA'S WINDOW

*Gideon Appah*

**M**emoirs through Pokua's Window is a new series of works by Gideon Appah in response to his upbringing within an extended Ghanaian family. He recalls his grandparents, aunts, and uncles who are characterized by strong family bonds, religious activities, and folklore.

Through nostalgic blues, verdant green landscapes, and thick charcoal lines, his monochromatic compositions dreamily depict domestic interiors and landscapes shaped by memories of an upbringing intercepted with rivers, plains, trees, plants, and tiles.

Appah's main inspiration is sourced from his old family album, which includes photographs of familiar and unfamiliar faces; he attempts to recreate the living experiences of a typical Ghanaian home setting in the 80's and 90's.



*A Place-  
holder,*  
2017,  
mixed  
media  
(acrylics,  
wax, pho-  
tographs)  
on canvas,  
169 cm x  
227 cm







**Left**  
*Transient*,  
 2017, mixed  
 media (acryl-  
 ics, wax, pho-  
 tographs) on  
 canvas, 92 cm  
 x 154 cm

(Image has  
 been rotated  
 90° counter-  
 clockwise for  
 layout)



**Right**  
*Akutu dua  
 ene okra a  
 oda gyam*  
 (Orange,  
 tree and  
 cat on fire),  
 2017, mixed  
 media  
 (acrylics,  
 wax, photo-  
 graphs) on  
 canvas, 154  
 cm x 102 cm



*Memoir*, 2017,  
mixed media  
(charcoal, oil stick,  
wax) on paper, 60  
cm x 42 cm



In a meditative state, Appah paints and superimposes domestic objects such as pots, stools, lamps, windows, burglar proofs, album photographs, and masks into the painting's background. The uncertainty of these forms alludes to the inconsistency of recollection, while the juxtaposition of their vibrant cool and warm tones—blue, green, orange, and red—are redolent of the contrast between homes' interior rooms and exterior porches.

A continual motif in Gideon's work are 'rivers', which highlight his preoccupation with remembering memory and its subconscious movements; with transitions and nature. He creates them through a thick and rough application of acrylics, posters, prints, and photographs, swirling across the paintings in transient, fluid motion merging beyond the canvas.

Within the background of his mixed media paintings, Appah calls attention to his family's occupations, from hairdressers to seamstresses. Not only do Appah's paintings probe his own subconscious, his memories and dreams, to depict the spaces of his childhood, but his work as a whole serves as an archive of communal life in Accra, Ghana.🌿

**Gideon Appah** was born in Accra, Ghana in 1987. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts at The Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana in 2012. Gideon has held exhibitions in Ghana including his first solo exhibition dubbed 'sensation' at the Goethe Institute in Accra and a End of Year Exhibition at the K.N.U.S.T. Museum.



# MAPS OF VELVET

*Suzana Poghosyan*

When I moved to New York, I began identifying as Glendale-Armenian. I found that the nomenclature creates space for discourse and meaning, especially for the intangible characteristics of ethnic identity. I believe place is significant and I am deeply interested in how it shapes art and visual culture.

*Roadmaps* began as a collaboration with Artesson's Tereza Davtyan to create a space for dialogue between contemporary international artists of Armenian descent with those living in the country. While reviewing submissions, however, the Velvet Revolution erupted in Yerevan—suddenly, identity and independence were at the forefront of the national conversation in Armenia too. While the events of April 2018 didn't completely redefine Armenian culture, they resulted in a visual expression of the decades-long revolutionary sentiment percolating in the Armenian consciousness. Artists from all walks of life submitted work and began an inclusive conversation about the future of our shared humanity.

Araz Farra's submission, *Armenian Diaspora*, is a mixed-media video

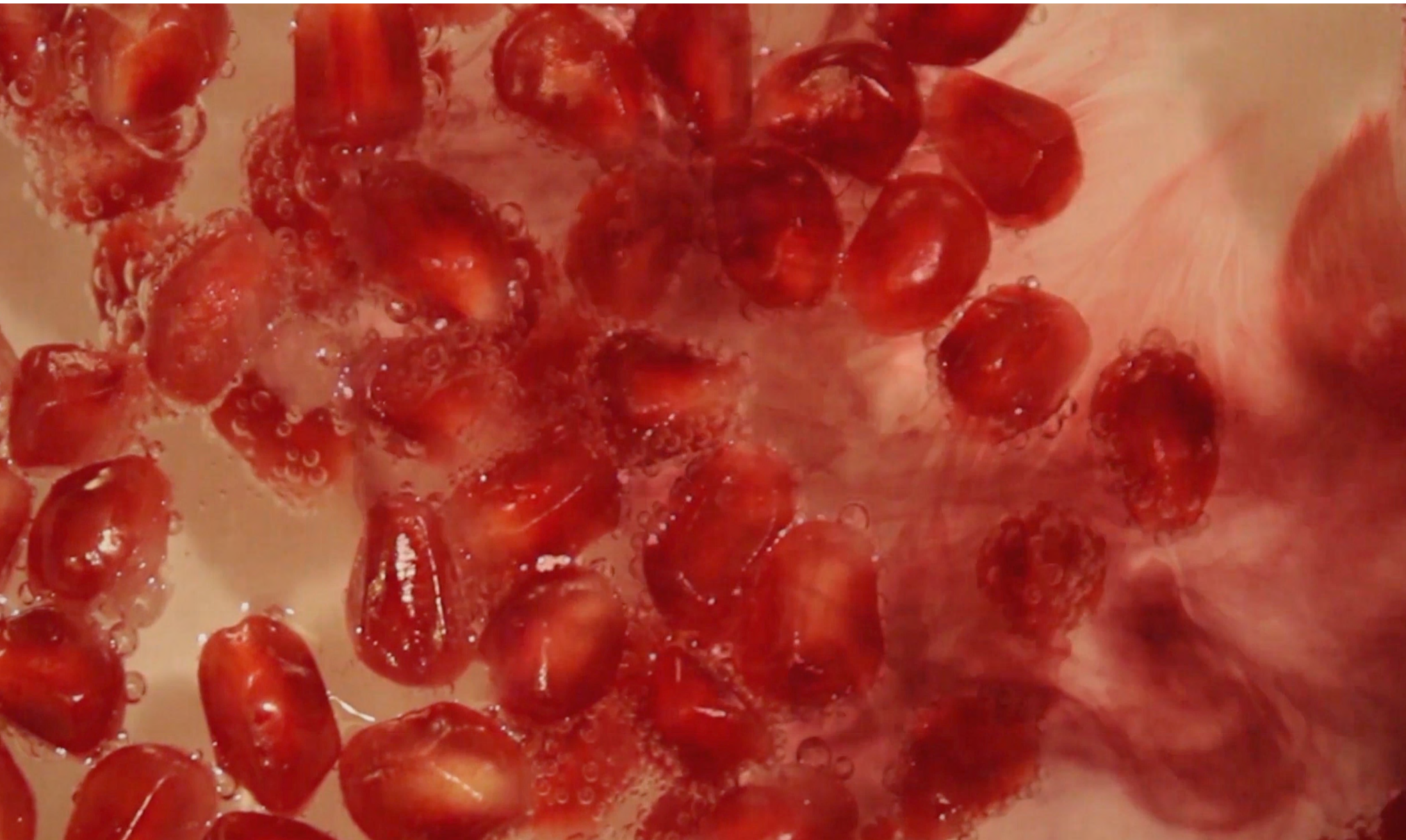


Image stills from *Armenian Diaspora*, courtesy of Araz Farra

*In this interview, Suzana Poghosyan, co-curator of Roadmaps, an exhibition focusing on contemporary Armenian identity, and Araz Farra, one of the visual artists showcased, discuss her creative process, their similar relationships to home, and diaspora privilege.*



installation featuring three speakers who discussed their experience with the Armenian diaspora, paired with Farra's own moving paintings. The recordings dive into Aleppo's multiculturalism, interactions within Armenian social groups, and ways some Armenians feel comfortable exploring their heritage from outside. Farra herself was born and raised in London to Armenian parents. As a college student, she spent her summers visiting Armenia, where her father studied as an undergraduate student. In our conversation, Farra and I spoke about the way the capital, Yerevan, has transformed and about our shared anxieties on relating to the city.

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**In the context of *Roadmaps*, I thought your work helped to tie all of these different experiences by speaking to the intersectionality of the Armenian identity in the diaspora and its dependence on geography. Even though we think we have this unifying attribute, all experiences are vastly different.**

It's asking people, "Why we are where we are?" It's reminding us all that we each have a story; something that we should keep alive. We still don't have recognition [for the Armenian Genocide]. We have never been given what we think we deserve, and I think that every Armenian carries that—it's something we're very passionate about. And I think this is a reminder that, no matter where we are, we still have that common goal, a fight on our hands.

Each one of us has a story, which makes our lack of recognition even more insane. Every Armenian you speak to will give a story about their grandparents having to flee—every single one. Without a doubt, 80% of the diasporic Armenians I talk to will tell me a story about their grandparent, which is something I want to work with. I want to get people talking about their grandparents' stories because it's interesting to hear their stories coming from our generations' mouths.

**I get why you would record the grandchildren. It's a second-hand account, and those stories affected their here and now. Do you want to tell me about where you see yourself within the intersection of your Armenian identity and your Syrian and British identity?**

I think of myself as very much Armenian. I naturally have influences from Syria because my parents were born there. I'm very lucky to have this other side, it's a different connection to have with your family, and Armenian friends. I also feel as Armenian as I do British.

It's very lucky that in your lifetime you get to experience two, three, or four cultures. It gives you a wider perspective and a lot of homes. I can go to Belgium to an Armenian camp and that's another home. There are positives to the diaspora meaning that I can find a home in every country I go to if there is an Armenian.



I don't think anyone should see something like being a part of two cultures as negative. A lot of the time, the negative idea could be, "I don't know where I belong," which is valid—but I think it's such a great thing. I [am] Armenian-British. Even if it comes with its struggles, I don't think I would change it at all.

**Was your impression of Armenia different this summer after the Velvet Revolution?**

It's really weird, because when you go as a tourist, you're not really going to be a citizen; you won't realize what has changed as much as someone who lives there. For

example, when me and my friends go, we're always looking around like, "Look at the vibe! The vibe is great here and you won't get this kind of thing in London." And then, you remember this is just people's lives, and we're treating it like it's a marvelous holiday destination place. But in reality, people are striving to get a better life. But you don't see it, because you're not *really* there.

I think every Diaspora Armenia carries this guilt because you want to help out so much. And there are a lot of people who say: But we are helping out the economy by being here and spending our money. And I always think, "This



is not how we should be thinking. We're not really helping anything."

**I'm with you, in some ways we're just reinforcing a structure that keeps people working service jobs. This makes me think of the last speaker in your video who says that, "While repatriating back to Armenia might have been a goal for my grandparents, I like the life I've built in America."**

Many older generations of Armenians who watched the video and heard that bit were like, "No, we're not sure about the last one." The whole point of the film was to get different Armenian perspectives, because

that's the Armenian diaspora: we're so different even though we have one major thing in common. And while we can all go to Armenia, enjoy it, and have it be a big part of our lives, the way everyone thinks is completely different. What everyone ends up saying in their bits is that they're comfortable where they are now.

**Do you think it's because they've built a home?**

I guess in a way some people feel like their families spent so long rebuilding a life that to then to take it all back... Even if, at the time, the thought was they would go back and it was temporary that they had

to live [in their new country] but [Armenia is] home. It's just kind of sad, but what can you do? There are too many of us now. There are more of us in the diaspora than in Armenia.

My grandfather's family ended up in Syria after the genocide, and his mother and father were the first people to live there, so his 'Syrianness' was still vis-a-vis being in an Armenian family. But I imagine that his experience is not dissimilar to what Syrians are going through now after being so violently displaced in trying to keep their culture while going on with their lives. Over the next couple of decades, we're going to see what it looks like where Syrians rebuild their lives and reestablish ties with their home.

There are a lot of Syrian-Armenians I met in Armenia who want to go back to Syria. For them, everything is so different. You've got kids who've had to adjust their dialects. You

have to have people who've moved their whole lives. It's hard. It's hard to live in Armenia when you've got no choice.

**That was one of the biggest things: when you don't have a choice in where you're living.**

It's the guilt again. You get in the taxi and they ask you where you're from and you don't want to say. So then you just say it and you have to give the, "Oh it's not that good, it's much better here."

**I've resorted to just saying, "It's just different. We have our own problems."**

In a way, there are so many appealing things about Armenia; it's a very relaxed life, it's very easy going in terms of your day today, you can see whoever you want whenever you want. In our culture it's like, "Yes, I'm free two weeks from now, at 3 p.m." ●



**Suzana Poghosyan** (b. 1990, Yerevan, Armenia) is a New York based coordinator and curator specializing in contemporary art. In January of 2018 she founded The Honey Pump (Honey Pump Gallery) as a dynamic platform for nomadic exhibition models. The following summer she produced and co-curated, *Roadmaps*, an international exhibition in Yerevan, Armenia, featuring work by 23 international artists. Professionally, Poghosyan has worked as a studio manager for Leo Villareal, and acted as the production manager for Villareal's exhibitions with Pace Gallery New York and Pace Gallery Hong Kong.



# MY BLOSSOMED POTTED PLANT

Jennifer Saporzadeh

In Farsi there is one word for both ‘song’ and ‘poem’: *sher*. Songs are not of less significance than poems, and like folk music throughout the world, Persian songs are the people’s poems. Sung in homes, at times of celebration and sorrow—they are a means to collectively experiencing emotions—passed down from one generation to the next, and through the Persian diaspora, passed around the world.

Simin Ghanem’s album, *Gholake Cheshat* (قلک چشات, translation: the treasure within your eyes to be unlocked) was released in 1976, three years before the Islamic Revolution. The period following saw hundreds of thousands of people emigrating from Iran. In that change, the relationship to the music changed; informed in one sense by the schism people experienced in leaving, oftentimes never to return, and informed in another sense by the changes taking place in Iran itself.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution set to law prohibitions which exist until today, women were no longer allowed to sing publicly, acts of celebration and public dancing were criminalized, and Simin Ghanem herself disappeared from the public eye for 20 years. For those that remained, a mythology formed, which grows and persists with the first-generation children they bore. Simin Ghanem’s most famous song “Gole Goldoon” has been sung as a lullaby to children, on long car rides, in showers, and reverberates like a sad echo from home to home, from here to there. While it is a song of lost love, it has become a symbol of a lost home, “my blossomed potted plant/ my moonlit balcony / from you I am alone / fish out of its home.”

Upon translating these lyrics I was reminded of *The Book of Songs* from the Bible. *The Book of Songs*, or *Song of Solomon*, was once set to music, but all that is left are the lyrics. While the words in themselves have great value, I feel certain that there is significance in the music we cannot know. The same applies to the lyrics of Simin Ghanem’s songs; while the words in themselves are significant; the music they are set to is of equal importance. I urge readers of these translations to listen to the music, in order to understand the full impact of these songs.

The translations were done with the music in mind, and “Gole Goldoon” in particular, closely follows the rhyme and meter of the Farsi. 🎧

my blossomed potted plant  
from the wind has  
broke you come, come  
back so that my heart  
doesn’t moan

flower that gives night  
scent doesn’t scent at  
night who the night scent  
flower picked off of its  
home

the corner of the sky  
is with rainbows  
alight I am like the  
darkness you are  
the moon glow

If the wind from your  
head doesn’t reach to  
your hair I will go and  
get lost in the jungle of  
doze

my blossomed potted  
plant my moonlit  
balcony from you I am  
alone fish out of its  
home

the flower of all  
hope lost color and  
odor I became a  
river my heart is a  
slough

The sky becomes  
cloudy but flower of the  
sun on the willow tree  
drum is sad and heart  
struck / the valley  
becomes moonlit but  
flower of the moon upon  
the mountain bourn  
cannot venture up

with a wave of your hand  
you give existence to the  
stars blossoming flowers in  
gardens

when your eyelids get heavy  
two less stars are in the skies  
even the shaghayegh\* burns  
grow

my blossomed potted  
plant my moonlit  
balcony from you I am  
a lone fish out of its  
home

the flower of all  
hope lost color and  
odour I became a  
river my heart is a  
slough

gole goldoone man 6  
shekasteh dar bad 5  
to biya ta delam 6  
nakardeh faryad 5

gole shab boo bide 6  
shab boo nebideh 5  
qui gole shab boo ro 6  
as shakheh chideh 5

goosheyeh asemoon 6  
poreh ranginkamoon 6  
man mesleh tariky 6  
to mesleh mahtab 5

age bad as sareh 6  
zolfeh to nagzare 6  
man miram gom misham 6  
to jangaleh chab 5

gole goldooneman 6  
maheh hayvoon et man 6  
az to tanha shodam 6  
cho mahi as ab 5

gole har arezoo 6  
afteh az rang o boo 6  
man shodam root chooneh 6  
delam be mored ab 5

asemoon abro misheh 6  
amah goleh chorshid 6  
roo shakhehayeh bid 6  
delesh migireh 5  
dareh mahtahby misheh 7  
amah gole mahtab 6  
az berkehayeh ab 6  
bala nemireh 5

to ke dast tekoon midy 7  
be setareh joon midy 7  
mishthopej gol as goleh bah) 8

vchty cheshm maham miyan 7  
do setareh kam miyan 7  
misoozeh shaghayegh as dag 8

gole goldooneman 6  
maheh hayvoon et man 6  
az to tanha shodam 6  
cho mahi as ab 5

gole har arezoo 6  
rafteh az rang o boo 6  
man shodam root chooneh 6  
delam be mored ab 5

داب رد هتسکش نم هنودلگ  
لگ دایرف هدرکن ملد ات  
ایب وت هگید وب بش لگ  
هدیمن وب بش ور وب بش  
لگ یک هدیچ هخاش زا  
نومسآ ی هشوک نومک  
نیگتر رپ یکیرات لثم نم  
باتهم لثم وت رس زا داب  
هکا هردگن وت فلز

مشیم شمگ مریم نم  
باوخ لگنج وت نم  
نودلگ لگ نوویا  
هام نم مدش اهنت  
وت زا بآ زا یهام  
وچ

وزرآ ره لگ وب  
و گتر زا هتفر  
هنوخدور مدش نم  
بادرم هی ملد

هشیم یربا نومسآ  
دیشروخ لگ اما  
دیپ یاه هخاش  
ور هریگیم شلد

هشیم یباتهم هرد  
باتهم لگ اما بآ  
یاه هکرب زا  
هریمن لابل

یدیمن نوکت تسد هک  
وت دیمن نوج هراتس  
هب ی غاب لگ زا  
لگ هفکشیم

دایم مه تامشچ یتقو  
دایم مک هراتس ود  
غاد زا قیاقش  
هزوسیم نم نودلگ  
لگ نم نوویا هام  
مدش اهنت وت زا بآ  
زا یهام وچ وزرآ ره  
لگ وب و گتر زا  
هتفر هنوخدور مدش  
نم بادرم هی ملد



# URBAN DECAY

*Sheyda Allahverdiyeva*

Driving east along the Caspian shore of Baku, there is a little turn to the left that leads to an abandoned textile factory. The narrow street with bumpy asphalt ends where arches and the faded portrait of the man who built this factory mark its entrance.

Azerbaijani oil millionaire Haji Zeynalabdin Taghiyev (Hacı Zeynalabdin Tağıyev, 1823-1924) founded this factory in 1897. Taghiyev's childhood was spent in poverty; he lost his mother at the age of 10 and had to start working as a builder from a young age to help his shoemaker father sustain the large family.

By the late 19th century, Baku had become one of the most important oil producers in the world and, therefore, a precious backyard of the Russian Empire. Wealth generated from the production of "Black Gold" was transforming the architecture and lifestyle in the city. Oil that gushed in Taghiyev's land in Bibi-Heybat made him one of the wealthiest men of Baku when he was 35 years old. As a firm believer that petroleum money should only act as a means for developing other industries, Taghiyev played an important role in Baku's industrial and societal transformation, investing in a number of long-term education, agriculture, and infrastructure projects.

Deprived of the opportunity to study himself, Taghiyev advocated the impor-





tance of knowledge: he sponsored the publication of newspapers and magazines, had the Qur'an translated into Azeri, and built opera and theatre buildings. Thanks to the scholarships he provided, many talented and underprivileged young people were able to study abroad who became renowned Azerbaijani figures. He opened many schools, including one for girls, for which he had to fight. The religious authority at the time denounced him and this initiative as blasphemous, going so far as threatening his life. But Taghiyev succeeded in founding the school, citing his faith in the bright future of a country where mothers are educated and intellectual.

The establishment of the cotton factory is one Taghiyev's most notable projects. Prior to even laying its foundations, Taghiyev had bought large plots of land outside Baku and employed local farmers to plant cotton. The factory made a name for the excellent quality of its calico fabric, used by Muslims during pilgrimage to holy places. Despite competition from the Russian textile giants, it became the main supplier of this fabric—one of the best-equipped and successful ones in the Empire. The factory functioned until the early 2000s, employing around 8,000 people. The textile factory at the far east end of Baku impacted the emergence of a whole new residential area, initially laid for its workers. Here, they could live as a community, attend evening classes and send their kids to school. As a result of population transfer by Soviet authorities, the area became one of the most diverse parts of Baku. It was a place of harmonic coexistence "of Azerbaijani with the Jewish, Armenian,

Russian and Tatar colleagues," as one of the residents I spoke to recalled.

The economic chaos after the fall of the Soviet Union caused fabric production to plummet, and since then, "Kombinat," as people call this place, has been abandoned. What used to be one of the largest factories of the Russian Empire now consists of half-ruined working halls, a mill, and a "storage area for furniture and other stuff," according to its watchman. Groups of stray dogs have inhabited the ruins, and bushes and trees have overtaken the pathways. Some parts of it have been transformed into car repair shops or storehouse units; the rest depreciates with every rainfall.

Azerbaijan has faced a new oil boom and enjoyed an economic rise since late 1990s. Much like the first oil boom, construction of luxury high-rises has radically changed the face of the city. However, these processes have not touched the old manufacturing sites, despite the aspirations of the government to revive non-oil industries. Taghiyev's cotton factory, as well as the numerous other industrial plants, has been left to deteriorate. According to the watchman, there is no point in restoring it because the technology is obsolete. No one seems to know anything about the destiny of "Kombinat."

The surrounding residential buildings bear the personal touches of their current residents: they have added balconies, water tanks and other extensions, stretched grapevines on the walls; the sidewalks have been fenced to make little gardens for ground-floor residents, and the facades have been trans-





formed into “chat spaces” for school children. But the residents of “Kombinat” refrain from making fundamental changes to their living spaces, as they fear that the city officials might decide to extend the seaside boulevard further east or build high-rises. Following the trend in central parts of the city, “beautification” projects are increasingly affecting the peripheries, although it is questionable whether these short-term actions will beget long-term investments in a diversified economy. On entering the yard of the factory, there is a quote by Nariman Narimanov

(1870-1925), an Azerbaijani Bolshevik revolutionary, writer, publicist, and politician whose education Taghiyev sponsored. His words are a powerful promise: “The heirs and those who are obliged to fulfill the will of Janab (Mister) Haji [Taghiyev] will never allow the deeds of his majesty to be lost” (translated from old Azeri language). Even if the factory’s ruins are razed to the ground, Baku’s legacy of a robust manufacturing industry, driven by an educated working class community, cannot be erased. ☹

**Sheyda Allahverdiyeva** began her career as a photojournalist in 2014. She is the author of a number of articles and photo essays dealing with gender issues, vanishing landscapes and professions published in several local and regional media outlets, such as *Chai-khana.org*, *Fors magazine*, *Post Pravda magazine* and others. Sheyda is a currently a freelance photojournalist based in Baku, Azerbaijan.



## GOING HOME

*Leena Aboutaleb*

de / construct

literature into spaces  
scrawled on finger/bones  
between guest beds  
tore through across bloodstained streets

womnwomxn  
collapse on back

heard tears heard cries heard falling heard the shot

v a s t theysaidlimitlessinfinitelimitfinite

womnwomxn

de / construct[ed] roman  
ruins marble sheets on rusted metros

— bang/bang/bang— — —

took M line; no sorry,  
grabbed line 1 towards sadat sadxt sadnt [mubarak]

fit in space theysaidinfinite

take the velvet out of the blackwash stars stolen hung across your wall [christ]  
hiding in between planets look for solace and ancient gods  
grab patches grab patches to de / construct space  
take it in between your fingers they never said it slips, drips out like water from between  
the rooms in your hands  
take the infinity and roll it into sleeves like carpets mama made you clean on dusty rooftops

did you forget where you came from?



took our letters all [س / ج / ر] under tongue write this in  
i said to de / construct the stars you stole left 'em hanging struckstarstruck  
evaporated space like milk for teashay don't grow na3na3 for this one but  
you plucked it out, roots hung from nothingness  
leafs sprout in space too, you know.

de / construct black patches velvet stains pluck out sun reflects from fabric brush off moon  
dust dust that sticks dust like your city dust that builds ashwaeyat in skins grown between  
olives in olive trees i said i'd rather be skinned from orange or fig trees but they said no choice,  
sorry, no choice they said

let em borrow spaces, you stole it anyways, but the dust builds and the  
sun reflects can you tell? can you see? can you hear? collapsing states along inner thighs.

want to hear you scream, he said. want to hear you, he said. took voice from throat washed his  
body in your moans, this is the sweetest, this is the sweetest, breast in mouth *eshta2talk fash5*

embroider velvet patches makeshift tents holding secrets in between rings of planets bounce  
off one to another grab hold of the dyed velvet this is space *hadi kol shi hadi kol shi*

sorry if you don't speak arabic, some things are easier to say in teeth grown in mouth lips torn  
stainedstrainedstained covered in metro bumps

womnwomxnwombwom/

universe melted in palm trees and your palms lines in hands made rivers you swim in your-  
self you swim in yourself he lifts your legs you are sowing together velvet patches they are the  
night sky dips in crevice the hollow space between throat and collarbones meteor crash site  
fell asleep on a star's bed--kef? don't you know they get greedy? they sleep during the day  
play hide and seek from down under under there on the days you occasionally look down all  
you see is sand remember how it felt in the spaces of your body hothothot desert girl desert  
girl who are you kidding?

you stole space, stole it stole it and you let it swim over your body wrapped around your skin  
ate dates and didn't want to look down anymore remember his arms wrapped around waist re-  
member mama's soft hands remember baba's crinkled eyes in his smiles remember crumbling  
streets and infinite laughter

they said infinite, *mu?*

stars stare wonder why you're all the way up here  
she can't run away for long she's got no air and all dates  
she keeps swimming though haven't you seen bends in with light fractures I don't think  
she's

womnwomxnwombwom--  
are you grateful?  
brown girl brown girl brown girl line your eyes properly  
nefertiti grew  
herself from your skin in olives in olive trees, sorry not orange or fig trees, sorry  
do you wonder why they call your name?

infinite sky can't wrap around you not like mama's carpets  
you keep trying to hold onto it all but space drips, melts from the empty rooms in your  
fingers  
rinses itself out of human hands you're left with the sun kissing your skin [home]  
dust coating palms and cracking palm trees [home]  
sha3rik nefs illon as space curls tangle in their cold winds [not home]

maybe now is time to go home/ go home, go home  
roman ro/man you fall out of space, arab girl, the sun kisses you  
goodbye  
you feel it warm your skin more than ever before

the stars won't fall with you they stay upright the ones you stole  
desertgirlarabgirloliveskinned

unstitched the sky velvet patches in hands  
collapsed states along inner thighs ☹



# NAMEDROPPING

*Samuel Tafreshi*

When examining a one tenge banknote, the currency of Kazakhstan, one will find the renowned intellectual al-Farabi staring back. While walking the streets of Tehran, it would not be surprising to encounter Ferdowsi Street, Ferdowsi Metro, or Ferdowsi Park along a route. Whether in statues or signs, speeches or stamps, references to influential figures from the Islamic Golden Age (786–1258 CE) permeate the modern states of the Middle East and Central Asia.

A variety of scholars have become icons of countries formed centuries after their deaths. Farabi, Ferdowsi, Ibn Sina, al-Biruni, and countless others' images were adopted for the purpose of state-building during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The impressive legacy of these thinkers' achievements granted them, and any association with them, a historical legitimacy that the ruling elites of fledgling nations needed to project their authority backward through time. The contemporary representations, geographically disparate as they are, suggest the only shared connection between these writers is their time period and the depth of their contributions. On the contrary, they were quite closely connected within the intellectual community of the Khurasan region. Today, their images have been reproduced in far-flung cities and their achievements have been claimed by a dozen different states. In turn, what had been its own 'center' of intellectual and cultural production became an overlapping periphery beholden to the interests of emerging 'centers' in the region.

The historical province of Khurasan encompassed modern day Afghanistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, northeastern Iran, southeastern Turkmenistan, and significant portions of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. While it covered a vast geographic area, Khurasan shouldn't be understood in terms of its frontiers. Instead, the region was a realm of cities—easily accessible to one another through trade routes and political relationships. It began as a province of the Sasanian Empire, but reached its highest level of prominence as one of the three

Khazakstan Tenge Bills. Images courtesy of author and Wikicommons





regions administered by the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258 CE). Khurasan had been the cradle of the Abbasid Revolution and under the Abbasid Caliphate its major cities—Bukhara, Herat, Merv, Nishapur, Samarqand—grew to rival Baghdad and Damascus in size, distinction, and splendor. The city of Merv, in modern-day Turkmenistan, became of such great importance to the Abbasid Caliphate that Caliph al-Ma'mun briefly moved the capital from Baghdad to reside there. Far from what were the traditional heartlands of the Islamic empires in Arabia, Syria, and Iraq, Khurasan was a hub for many of the greatest thinkers of the Muslim world. Whether by way of poetry, theology, or science, traces of Khurasan's influence can be found in almost every discipline.

The scientists, mathematicians, poets, and philosophers of Khurasan contributed immeasurably to the development of medicine, geology, geography, poetic forms, and religious and philosophical discourse. Rudaki (d. 941 CE), born in present-day Tajikistan, is considered by many to be the father of Persian poetry. Only remnants of Rudaki's canon have survived, but through the existing fragments he has been venerated as one of the first poets of the New Persian language. The Persian language of pre-Islamic Iran disappeared as a literary tongue following the Arab conquest of Iran (654 CE), only to re-emerge as New Persian having adopted the Arabic script in the ninth century. Rudaki was one of the writers, as well as Ferdowsi, who heralded its return by experimenting with new poetic forms like the *rubā'iyyah* (Persian quatrain) and adapting Arabic poetic forms, such as the *qasida* (ode), for the Persian language.

Famously, while serving the Samanid Amir of Bukhara, Rudaki's poetic skill was enlisted to persuade the Amir to return to Bukhara. The Samanid ruler would traditionally spend spring and summer travelling outside the capital, Bukhara, to enjoy the other cities of his domain, but on this occasion he had become so enamored with Herat (in modern-day Afghanistan) that he planned to stay indefinitely. Rudaki composed a poem for the Amir, in the hopes the poem might encourage him to return to Bukhara:

*O Bukhara, be happy, live long:  
The cheerful Amir is returning to you.  
The Amir is the moon, Bukhara, the sky;  
The moon is returning to the sky.  
The Amir is a cypress, Bukhara, the garden;  
The cypress is returning to the garden.*

The Amir was so moved by the poem that he instantly became homesick for Bukhara and, without boots, mounted his horse and began riding back.

The influence of Farabi on the field of philosophy was as far-reaching and significant as Rudaki's accomplishments in poetry. At a time when the western interest in Hellenic philosophy had waned, Farabi (d. 950 CE), born in present-day Kazakhstan, took up the mantle of the Greek philosophers and played a vital role in Islamic philosophy by comprehensively reading and producing commentaries on Aristotle's works. Farabi's commentaries on Aristotle would also become central to Western philosophers of Christianity in the thirteenth century, such as St. Thomas Aquinas, as the West attempted to revive their own exploration of Greek philosophy. Ibn Sina (d. 1037 CE), another monumental figure in the

study of Hellenic thought, infamously struggled to comprehend Aristotle's *Metaphysics* as a young man in Bukhara until stumbling upon Farabi's commentary in a bookstall.

Ibn Sina, later in his life, became incredibly well-versed in Aristotelian philosophy and sciences, as can be gleaned from his correspondence with his younger contemporary Biruni:

*"This letter is in response to the questions sent to him by Abu Rayhan al-Biruni from Khawarazm... You requested—may Allah prolong your safety—a clarification about matters some of which you consider worthy to be traced back to Aristotle, of which he spoke in his book, al-Sama' wa'l 'Alam, and some of which you have found to be problematic."*

In the tenth/eleventh century CE, Ibn Sina and Biruni (d. 1050), two of the greatest figures of Islamic thought, began a correspondence critiquing the ideas and concepts of Aristotle's chief cosmological text, *On the Heavens*. In a series of letters sent across modern day Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, they investigated a range of ideas from the weight of heaven to the existence of other worlds. This geographically disparate relationship was made possible through the intellectual community of Khurasan, which connected these two remarkably active minds.

Perhaps Ibn Sina's most influential ideas were those expressed in his canon of five medical texts, *al-Qanun fi al-Tibb*, that described the symptoms of diabetes, instructions for surgical procedures, studies of contagious disease and how to prevent them, as well as numerous philosophical and therapeutic remedies.

His *Qanun* became the most popular and authoritative medical text throughout Asia, Africa, and Europe; in Europe, dozens of Latin translations could be found as well as Arabic editions that had been printed in Rome. Biruni vigorously studied Ptolemy's works and, like Ibn Sina, produced an indispensable work of science and mathematics by finding Ptolemy's miscalculations of the earth's longitude/latitude and accurately correcting them.

Grasping the relationship between Farabi's work and Ibn Sina's, as well as Ibn Sina's and Biruni's, is crucial to understanding the unparalleled and frenzied activity that took place in Khurasan during the Islamic Golden Age. The interconnection between these scholars of Khurasan was crucial to the development of their ideas during the period, but these relationships are obscured by the contemporary tendency to divide their legacies between nations.

In the span of only a few centuries, Rudaki, Ferdowsi, Ibn Sina, Farabi, and Omar Khayyam all shared the same library within the fortress of Bukhara and heralded the rebirth of the Persian language. From Ferdowsi's epic poem, the *Shahnameh*, to Imam Bukhari's collection of hadiths, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, the scholars of Khurasan produced many of the preeminent Arabic and Persian works of the Islamic Golden Age. It is interesting to note that while many throughout the world know of Rumi and Ibn Sina, most have never heard of Khurasan and would be surprised to learn that these writers hail from Balkh, Afghanistan and Bukhara, Uzbekistan, respectively. Considering the impact of these writers' works and their continued prominence today, one



must wonder how Khurasan, as their cultural center, has been so easily ignored in the formation of national histories of the Middle East and Central Asia.

A history of military conquests, invasions, and occupations could explain Khurasan's decline as a political and intellectual center, but it does not explain its absence in the national histories of contemporary states. How has Khurasan been so overlooked, while its iconic figures can be seen in the statues of Tehran and Vienna, on the banknotes of Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, and heard in the mouths of the most powerful contemporary leaders?

Khurasan's vibrance diminished gradually, but it was not until the onset of Russian imperial domination in the latter half of the nineteenth century that the region's past became fully obscured. The conquests and colonial occupations of the British and Russian Empires imposed new regional boundaries governed by imperial expansion. The further partitioning of Central Asia into five Soviet republics in 1924, under the USSR, attempted to erase previous connections and establish new political communities on an ethno-linguistic basis. The borders manufactured throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century gradually divided Khurasan between the states of Afghanistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

Once, Merv could be reached as easily from Nishapur as from Herat or Bukhara; despite these cities' continued proximity to each other, the realm was divided, re-organized and recast as the periphery of emerging centers of power. Nishapur now found itself along the edges of the Iranian nation and, by the logic of nationalism,



more connected to the distant city of Tehran than the closer Afghan city of Herat. The gradual dismantlement of the great colonial power structures of the nineteenth century, allowed for the rise of third world nationalism throughout the twentieth century. Transforming nationalism into a post-colonial ideology required the nation, as a community and as an identity, to reformulate the past with the present in mind. Nishapur may have historically enjoyed a closer relationship to Herat than Tehran, but as a city in the modern Iranian nation, Nishapur's past had to be understood as being more intimately tied to Iran than any other nation.

The accessibility and interconnection of the Central Asian cities that had allowed Khurasan to prosper as a locus of intellectual and artistic achievement was rendered impossible by the imposition of borders. As the old center fractured, new ones emerged—pulling Khurasan's iconic figures and cultural history with them.

Khurasan receded until it became no more than the borders that now divide it.

Nationalism not only fractured Khurasan's geography, but dissected and co-opted its cultural legacy as well. A shared history needed to be manufactured and promoted as the basis for legitimacy. Ferdowsi, Rudaki, Biruni, Ibn Sina, Omar Khayyam, and many other figures' historical authority and significance was without question and nationalists could seize each figure and co-opt them for their needs. If Khurasan could be forgotten, then each of them could be remade in the image of the nation.

The division of the land provided a territorial framework for dividing the historical figures among the states. Rudaki, for example, may have served the Samanid court in modern-day Uzbekistan, but had been born and died in modern-day Tajikistan and as a result, was claimed as an icon of uniquely Tajik identity and achievement. Rudaki and Ibn

Sina, moreover, have been so explicitly deemed representatives of the Tajik state that both can be found on somoni banknotes. Ferdowsi, who also served in a court in Uzbekistan, was Iranian-born and became the cultural centerpiece of Reza Shah Pahlavi's creation of an Iranian national identity. One of the first historical sites to be celebrated in Pahlavi Iran was Ferdowsi's tomb (Ringer 267). Ferdowsi statues, streets, parks, and metro stations are strewn across Iran and while most street names in Tehran changed following the Revolution of 1979, Ferdowsi Avenue was of the few to remain. In Kazakhstan, Farabi has been so individually venerated by the state that his likeness appears on not one, but seven different tenge notes (the 1, 200, 500, 1,000, 2,000, 5,000, and 10,000). Turkey, rather ironically, once used a 5000 lira note that featured a portrait of the secular nationalist Ataturk on the front with the figure of the Persian Sufi, Rumi, on the reverse. Biruni's appearance on Syrian, Iranian, and Egyptian stamps



signals how even somewhat unrelated states seek to associate themselves with the image of Khurasan's writers. As these major theologians, poets, and scientists were elevated as icons, Khurasan was necessarily pushed to the margins of history.

As centuries passed, the remarkable achievements of Khurasan's intellectuals eclipsed the community that allowed them and their ideas to flourish. The banknotes and boulevards that now represent those iconic scholars have, similarly, overshadowed the scholars themselves. The statues and the banknotes have become cardboard cut-outs of figures that, today, represent little more than the legitimacy of the state.

Previously a political, intellectual, and cultural center, Khurasan was forced

to become an eternal periphery, only discernible through the borders that divide it and the nationalism that consumed its greatest figures. For the nations to usurp the political power the individuals' legacies carry, the cultural and political power of Khurasan must be entirely forgotten. If Rudaki, Ferdowsi, and Farabi are all seen as representing the intellectual milieu of Khurasan, then they cease to be symbols of nationalism. Whereas, if Khurasan ceases to exist in cultural and historical memory then Rudaki can be Tajikistan's possession, Ferdowsi may belong solely to Iran, and Kazakhstan can lay claim to Farabi. The emergence of a new power structure requires the irrelevance of the old. The establishment of new political and cultural centers, similarly, requires the appropriation of the former center's accomplishments. ☹

**Samuel Tafreshi** is an Iranian-American writer and activist raised in the U.S. and England. They hold a BA in Religion and their work has focused on comparative analysis of Persian and Western literature, while also exploring the presence of Islam in the activity of Muslims historically considered un-Islamic. Recently, they have been researching political protest throughout the South Caucasus states.

# 10 AM

## Yasmine Badaoui

Sometimes we speak syllables with no meaning /  
in familiar arabic with one word i can convey the  
contents of the red sea / in native english my words  
slash the land carve the mountain in my awkward  
image / crumbles of truth pouring like umbrella  
girl offerings/ salt cauterizes my womb where life  
spurts like cleansing waters /

the war zone is where blue cables plug into black  
boxes / mass surveillance / mass survivors/ we  
never thought we'd turn out like this / hyphenated  
/ atoms split thin between tectonic continents /  
displaced joints dismembered limbs all diasporic  
elbows & discarded ears / don't listen to the brown  
girls song it will break your heart /

i was named for sinbad's black bird / i know my  
rights so i remained silent/ the mines pained me  
grandfather's black lungs / pine trees gave me  
father's eyes / the vodka burned my throat the  
ways my lies did / my clock hands stick way past  
the mayflowers fleets of maps / colonizers declared  
me flat earth/ a tree with no roots/ maybe time is  
really running out

once my friend you and I were like dinosaurs /  
caged lights burning bright as supernovas / hell is a  
city under siege / heaven a place where water runs  
clean / you know how i love the lost and found /

puzzle boxes mismatched & made in china/  
jagged pieces of revolution abandoned where the  
sidewalk ends / lost buttons counted on coats /  
found cherry cores clogging courtyard fountains/  
oldtimers coughing across aisles/ read my coffee  
cup / doesn't it look like simple brooms sweeping  
up the dust of us? ☹



# IFTAR

*Mahdi Ali*

For years after I left my faith, Ramadan was a time of lament. Coming from an Iraqi Shiite household, Ramadan has always been a month of jubilation, communal struggle, nightly celebration and feast, and spiritual reflection. For a host of adolescent American Muslims, it was also a season during which we could venture outside of our homes past curfew; Ramadan is a season celebrated in the night, and I connected to the faith through *suhoor* with my friends.

Exiting a faith is a messy internal affair. Islam is a peculiar faith that expressly promotes itself as a way of life. I never understood Islam to be an edifice of praying, fasting, and paying zakat. It is the defining foundation of a Muslim's character. As I found the chasm between Islam and myself deepening, my own internal decision-making mechanism became disrupted. A spiral of uncertainty gave birth to bitterness, and I felt a distinct duty to live antithetical to Islam. That is, I was to be the anti-Muslim. A *kafir*.

When Ibrahim Mimou—of OPENISM and Salafi Cowboy—articulated his vision to me for a community *iftar* event, he made it clear that the goal was to bring together adjacent communities. Muslims, non-Muslims, artists, entrepreneurs, doctors, gay, straight; they were all invited to celebrate and break bread. His sentiments frothed a rich nostalgia inside of me. For the first time in years, I felt pride emanating from the faith that I left on ice years before.

The theme and cuisine of the event would be based on “MesoArabia,” an imagined utopia in Salafi Cowboy's cartoon universe free of borders and nations but rich with cognates of language, art, culture, heritage, and food—a liminal space celebrating cultural hybridity and cosmopolitanism. As a community





chef working at a French-Mexican restaurant called Trois Familia at the time, I would be tasked with chaffing up an experimental menu filled with a fusion of Arab and Hispanic cuisine.

Preparation for the event was challenging on a few fronts. First, the prep space was in my apartment, which lacked the accoutrements of a commercial kitchen. Second, we had to feed a lot of people with not a lot of money. In college, I had become accustomed to making inexpensive and tasty food, but doing it on a large scale is another beast entirely. And further, when I was cooking for myself, I would only be making a single dish. For this event, I had to make an assortment of dishes to accommodate a medley of tastes. I had done this at restaurants, but under the direction of a chef, often times a very talented one. Now, I was the execute chef.

- Guacamole and Chips
- Cilantro Falafel
- Shawarma
- Yogurt with Aleppo Pepper
- Corn with Huitlachoche
- Pan Fried Eggplant,
- Avocado Ice Cream with Watermelon Granita

The community iftar itself was a fun and dynamic event. The space was an empty, cavernous downtown warehouse where conversation echoed throughout. Along with a huge bowl of

guacamole, Salafi Cowboy presented a new poster, a MesoArabian spoof of a bilingual sign by the California Avocado Commission warning the public against avocado theft.

The dishes we served were unconventional, I was told by attendees, but very hearty. Lots of people were pleasantly surprised by my avocado ice cream. Adding to that, Yousef and Ibrahim brought along their musician friends Takoda (guitar) and Ethan (tenor sax) to play an improvisational jazz set on an exposed, elevated floor above us, which added to the ambience and kept the vibes brewing until late in the evening. Some folks ended up staying till 1 a.m.

A few years ago, I would be baffled by the consolidation of my hybrid identity. I would have seen my current identity as apologetic and structurally fickle. I reject the notion of an identity. Identity, as described by language, feels rigid, and not in a manner that allows it to remain upright. Every human is a conglomerate, a cloud of ideas and moods which habitually contradict. Instead of feeling contempt for the hypocrisy, I feel awe, and am impressed by the Universe's ability to inject quantum entanglement into every facet of itself. So, in the same vein that the Universe refuses to be nailed to an "essence," I refuse as well.

This was the spirit of the event. 🌙

**Mahdi Ali** is a cook, mediocre biochemistry student, and now a technologist and financier working in augmented reality. His biggest passion is feeding people. He's been cooking since he was 8 out of necessity ever since his mother was diagnosed with MS, but even before that, you could always catch him in the kitchen or outside by the grill.





# AN IRAQI INSHALLAH

Ziad Halub

I went to Kuwait to get away for a few days. I had heard that it was happier there, that the streets were paved, and that I could catch a cab without the risk of being kidnapped. I walked across the dusty land border and waited patiently for two hours to get a visa—all because I had heard it was happier there. I knew when I had arrived; the dirt tracks were transformed by asphalt and pavements began to appear. I got a cab without having to worry that my accent gave away my foreignness, unlike Basra where they knew I wasn't a native as soon as my mouth opened. I had arrived at Kuwait City unharmed.

But the people were no happier than those on the dusty roadsides of Basra. My Kuwaiti friends battled the same personal problems, albeit in a more developed environment. The fantasy I was sold on the rooftop of my aunt's house was a fallacy born out of the contrast between the chaos of Iraq and the ordered way-of-being that Kuwait exhibited with pride. I slept that night thankful knowing that utopia was not simply a two-hour drive away.

The idea of happiness moves us. It comes in different forms: stability, wealth, luxury, peace, excess, simplicity. It's an arbitrary experience reinforced by our personal lives and the understanding we have of our pasts. But happiness was not a place I could visit, and not one just out of reach for my family.

The next day, it had come as a surprise when I asked my Kuwaiti friend for dinner and he replied with a causal *Inshallah*. Infuriated by his response, I swore at him in disbelief.

Growing up, we had known inshallah to mean no, a polite (but almost divinely) definitive rejection. Inshallah was dismissive in my household, and to the many Iraqis I know. Translated as "God willing," it reads as "hopefully" or "we'll see"—it's a phrase that lacks the certainty of action. Certainty, or sureness came in the form of *akeed*; inshallah was used to blow people off, but *akeed* meant "for sure." On the phone, my friend laughed at my reaction and explained that he had every intention of keeping to the plans that we had arranged. To him, inshallah and *akeed* could be used interchangeably. To me, the words were antonymous to one another.

Back in Basra, my cousin and I spoke about inshallah and the associations we attach to it. She had said it with the same melancholy I had come to expect tethered to its syllables, the eyes that always trail off before the word escapes our breaths, the sigh of exhaustion, the pained smile, the flippant nod. I asked her how strange it was that in Kuwait inshallah carried all the freedoms of certainty, whereas here it weighed its burden onto our tongues. Her response was reasoned and balanced by the romanticism and reality that most Iraqis are conflicted by: "When things that should be *akeed* stop becoming *akeed*, then our lives are left at the mercy of god's God's will."

Certainty is a privilege in Iraq. It has been like this for as long as I remember. Families would fall asleep without knowing if they were going to wake up in the morning. My cousins would leave the house without the assurance, or even expectation, of returning

home. Schools would cease to exist overnight. When something as *akeed* as going to work or school stops becoming a mundane certainty, then what prospects could we possibly have when controlling our daily lives?

There is an admission of defeat to a divine entity when we say inshallah; it's in equal measures both hopeful but pleading—and serves as a reminder of the ambiguity Iraqis exist within. The Iraqi is stripped of agency. The certainty of routine or even plan-making that is often overlooked elsewhere in the world, is handed over to the heavens. Human hands no longer able to wield the power to create, a divine intervention is evoked in a ritual of pessimism. We then leave creation (of plans, of routine) in the hands of god. If it happens or not is whether god wills it. The inshallah of a Kuwaiti was the opposite, a personal choice, an affirmation of personal freedom and certainty that is charged by a celestial approval. There was a confidence I had not recognized in my friend's inshallah—it didn't weigh heavy on his heart like ours did.

Freedoms are carried with us, worn as insignias by the way in which we can express ourselves. Iraqis were used to hardship, and rejection, and the struggle of melancholic hopes imparted onto our children. We silently appeal to a higher power every time inshallah is said. It is a phrase that becomes a vehicle of our ancestry—rooted in the acceptance of pain and loss. We have become trapped by our words. 🌙

**Ziad Halub:** Twenty-something, British-Iraqi, product of exile. Archaeologist, photographer, writer, and storyteller. Hates writing about himself.



Original artwork for by Knar  
Hovakimyan



# FREEDOM FIELDS

*Farrah Fray*

Set against the backdrop of post-revolutionary Libya, *Freedom Fields* is a documentary that follows the journey of three women attempting to represent their country through football. Fadwa is an aspiring oil engineer; Halima, a soon to be doctor, and Nama, a Tawerghian internally displaced refugee and athlete. The film, which is Naziha Arebi's directorial debut, is the first ever feature length film to come out of Libya by a Libyan, let alone by a woman.

Filmed over the course of five years, *Freedom Fields* bears witness to the power of women when faced with challenges. It's one of the rare films that, whilst specific in content, taps into a shared universal memory through the vehicle of football. From the tumultuous state of Libya after Gaddafi's death, to the rise of extremist advocates, as well as the country's violently fractured political state, the women of the football team find themselves navigating both the past and present, private and public, personal and political to achieve their goal.

For most audiences, myself included, this is the first time we are given a look inside the aspiring Libyan national women's team, as well as their lives and pursuits. For others, scenes such as Tripoli's celebrations during the revolution's one-year anniversary may be familiar. However, *Freedom Fields* provides an unparalleled delicacy in bringing to its audiences the often-private conversations of post-revolutionary Libya. Personal conversations nuance and enrich the coverage and attention previously given to the country, whilst offering an alternative narrative for freedom.

Image stills from author; Film by Naziha Arebi; *Freedom Fields*, 2018



*Freedom Fields* world premiered in September at Toronto International Film Festival and had its UK premiere at BFI London International film festival, with sold out screenings and standing ovations at both. Next, it heads to Mumbai Film Festival, followed by Stockholm International Film Festival, and IDFA, with screenings planned internationally as well as in Libya and the MENA region for next year. *Freedom Fields* has also recently won the award for Best Film at Joburg Film Fest.

For more information:  
[www.freedomfieldsfilm.com](http://www.freedomfieldsfilm.com)  
[@freefieldsfilm](https://twitter.com/freefieldsfilm)



While the film is visually stunning, it's the juxtaposition of different settings that sets it apart. Far from bleeding into existentialism, the seemingly mundane, fleeting, and poignant of Libyan life are brought together in moments that could only be captured through five years of filming. In one scene, we see Fadwa, calm and smiling, sitting on a chair at night, talking about how she sewed her own button on for the first time as we hear gunfire in the background. In another, Halima, during a shift at the pharmacy, declares that if one wants to play football, then that is their desire.

Later, moments of Libya's famous match against Zimbabwe during the African Cup are captured, before shifting to men cheering upon Libya scoring a goal, and Halima in a car asking herself, "Why can't we have a women's team like the men; do we not honor you?" Another close and personal shot shows

Halima is in her car again, singing along to Adele's "Someone Like You" during a rainy day in Tripoli.

Later we are given access to Nama's struggles and ambitions, most notably as she speaks of how the abandonment of her hometown Tawergha has left it dark and empty. Laced in dim, neutral, and blue tones, the director gives us a glimpse into the darkness and deepness of Nama's pain. The cinematography of *Freedom Fields* truly shines in these types of scenes; with tangerines, blue and yellow hues amplifying the warmth and intimacy of Arebi's camera work. Every shot feels deep-seated and personal.

Despite the differences between Fadwa, Halima, and Nama's backgrounds and interests outside of football, we see their journeys propelled by strength, will, and determination in equal measure. These are the very words they shout in

unison before every match they play; whether in Libya or in Lebanon, against Egypt, Jordan, or Palestine. Together, they overcome mental, emotional, and physical hardship to ascertain an unwavering belief in the magnitude of their own power. This reaches its peak after a successful match against Palestine, where Fadwa's voice slips across the pitch, saying, "You start running. It breaks the fear barrier."

The women's own internal conflicts don't simply stem from finding football difficult to master, but rather, are the result of the different constraining, cultural, and societal factors that exclude them from being in the field. Towards the very end of the film, we see young girls sitting in a football workshop organized by HERA, Fadwa, Halima, and Nama's newly founded NGO. Halima asks the girls in front of her, "And if a woman wants to be president, why can't she?" *Freedom Fields* is unapologetically raw, intimate, and honest in a way that art should be to create change in how society treats both men and women.

Despite the ensuing triumphs and disappointments of the different matches that the girls play, achievements related to football are not a separate chapter to other struggles faced; but rather an intrinsic part of the bigger stories of these women, as they mediate between friendships, family

relationships, sexism, extremism, and their desire to play football. Besides the physical sense, football becomes something that can also be understood as a metaphor for fulfilling desire. Much like anything relating to football, *Freedom Fields* is about using self-belief to move forward and achieve happiness. Perhaps the most important lesson that audiences will take away from the film is that 'progress' isn't linear, but rather, that it oscillates like a pendulum in motion, often faltering into the past before moving forward.

The art of moving forward is constantly imagined in the film. This is perhaps most poignant in the very first conversations of the film between Fadwa and her team mates, as she describes their past endeavors as "beginnings without endings", in a touching scene that we cannot help but remember throughout the film. It seems that, as the film ends, these women are rewriting their stories and creating new pursuits. It is fitting, then, that the film concludes with a shot of Nama running towards the camera; which is perhaps Arebi's final ode to the importance of constantly moving forward.

From its carefully crafted approach, to the richness of Fadwa, Halima, and Nama's stories as both players and women in Libya, Arebi succeeds in bringing the authentically personal, female, and Libyan to the big screen. ●



**Farrah Fray** is a writer, activist, and poet studying in London by way of Libya. She has written for *Kinguistics* as well as *Letters by Libya* and translated for *Haawiyat*, a Syrian comic aimed at refugees. Her work navigates explorations of culture, displacement, feminism and identity with a focus on Libya and London. Her latest poetry collection will be published in September 2017.



# THE VALLEYS OF BALTISTAN

*Amara Waseem*

Despite the political difficulties facing Pakistan, Skardu's culture is preserved. Identities are embraced and faces glow with excitement. Eyes of the locals read 'welcome to Skardu' as they wave at our taxi driving past their gardens—all genuine. My mother-tongue was crosshatched onto my own, melting flavors within my straying dialogue. I felt an unfamiliarity for both of my languages; my mouth became a colosseum for the two languages, blood-shedding, tongue tearing sounds and words. In and out of consciousness, subdued and deafening senses of attachment.

Rich aromas of roses burst through the open window my head sits on as we pass the flower gardens. I pressed my lips to the petals I plucked from the rose that fell through my window. One hand avoided the copper thorns, another stretched out of the car.

Moments before prayer in Shigar's oldest wooden mosque, a city just beside Skardu, I stood by the bare window—two oak folds opened and diametrically opposed. A family of trees neatly packaged on the garden floor, gleaming apricots pierced through disoriented branches, much like gems in a cave. Below the window above a seat-like carving sat dozens of prayer mats folded in an irritable manner. Swift tones of royal blue and burnt orange imbued from the threading, especially when the sunlight patched itself upon the Islamic motifs, lingering dust particles swam above it through the air, almost like dead fragments of the sun came down to greet the Friday prayer offerors. The silence from this spiritually-reviving afternoon disturbed by the whisperings of prayer beads and *dhikr* from five hundred years ago. On the overgrown carpet rested an exposed tomb of *tasbihs* and *turbahs*, aged by consistency.

Images courtesy of author





Kids shake apple trees like Animal Crossing—a Nintendo video game before my eyes. The fruit drops like Icarus, but this was real. So were the deep conversations I found myself having with the local taxi drivers on over-memorized folk tales.

A pretty place, pretty views with pretty rough weather conditions and pretty tough tragedies. Our taxi driver drove us up the mountains, swirling in a jeep, crushing rocks under our tires, screeching. These mountains watched over the villagers as mothers are with their babies. Our route was diluted with stampedes of sheep hurdled by experienced shepherds. The wind whistled through the gaps between each mountain, a familiar song the trees swayed to and somehow approved of by the hidden moon.

The dawn sky had sponge-painted dusty, milky clouds dribbling in an explosion of blue, a mirror of my lapis lazuli bought from the bazaar. A promising afterglow swam over the horizon. I noticed the attitudes of the locals were calm, with their complete reliance on God above the ice-capped mountains, they continued living. They knew the future was a struggle but, for them, only now seemed to matter as if they lived upon optimism. ●

**Amara Waseem** is an artist, poet and student based in London. She has a zeal for the reorientation of culture, spirituality, the motherland, and surrealism. From this, she ventures to illuminate on the recollection of fragmented identities in her work using her diaspora as a starting point. She was the first artist in residence for Female Muslim Creatives and has written for *Unread Magazine*.









# DRAPED

*Lizzy Vartanian Collier*



Alia Ali, *Astral*, 2017, BORDERLAND Series, 107 cm x 72 cm, photograph of pigment print on cotton rag

In Alia Ali's series BORDERLAND, sitters pose for anonymous portraits, their faces and bodies completely covered in ornate textiles. To create the photographs, Ali—a Yemeni-Bosnian-American artist—travelled across the world to interact with textile artisans living in communities scarred by power and destruction. The resulting images depict what Ali calls '-cludes,' a term which refers to whether the sitter is included or excluded in the portrait. As Ali writes for Still Harbor, "Who is on the other side of the fabric questions the very nature of belonging and interrogates the binary of home and exile. Is the subject the one who imposes the standards, the decision maker, the included? Or the excluded?"

Coming from two countries that no longer exist—Yugoslavia and South Yemen, growing up between Sana'a, Sarajevo, Istanbul and Indiana, and straddling Arab, European and American identities—Ali's work challenges a singular understanding of identity. Ali uses fabric to question the borders that divide and unite us. "I have been collecting fabric for almost all of my life," she says, "And I have been travelling for equally as long." Having spent her childhood visiting markets across the world with her mother, she became exposed to different techniques of fabric making



from a young age, realizing how difficult it was to pinpoint one particular source of production since many different influences impact the creation of a single piece of fabric—no matter how symbolic it may be of any one ‘culture’ or ‘nationality.’

Instead of focusing on borders that divide peoples and cultures, Ali’s attention is turned towards the places where cultures overlap. “I would argue that while man-made borders divide people, they do not necessarily divide culture; borders, in and of themselves, *are* cultural,” explains Ali. Borders are cultural as they separate one culture from another, creating dividing lines. Through BORDERLAND, Ali acknowledges that borders exist everywhere, whether they are manmade or naturally occurring. Borders can confine and block access, breaking communities and creating an ethos of fear and violence. “All these [borders] lend to an erasure of all that was,” adds Ali, “An erasure of what we see in these textiles. To me, communities that have a rich oral history express their stories and heritage through objects such as textiles.” Each piece of fabric tells a story of evolution, documenting the influences and histories of the cultures that led to its production. In fact, the word *text* comes from *textiles*, meaning ‘woven.’ However, as Ali explains: “Over time, those who wrote history were the ones who formed history; they are also the ones who form the perspective in which other societies

are seen. So when we are discussing borders and societies with an oral tradition rather than a literary one, it is clear that these societies and cultures are misunderstood and seen through their suffering and their existence on these geographic physical frontiers, rather than through their beauty and knowledge developed over time.” Thus, the figures in BORDERLAND are ‘location-less.’ There are no identifying landmarks, no landscapes or objects in the background to enable the viewer to easily locate the subjects. The only markers of identity are the textiles that cover every inch of each sitter’s body.

The figures portrayed in the series present themselves in a number of captivating positions. From their posture, one gets a sense of the personalities of the people that might be hiding behind the fabric. “Posing really depends on the movement of the individual and the understanding of how the fabric falls,” explains Ali, “There is a mixture of me staging the scene and of the individuals beneath the fabrics really expressing themselves in it.” It is almost as though the figures are playing up to the camera, and perhaps, the fact that their faces are covered allow themselves to express their point of view in a way that may seem quite liberating in the way that their identity becomes ambiguous. “Some people feel very confined and limited as to what to do,” adds Ali, “Others, who might be shy in reality become completely expressive







and performative when beneath the fabric. It's really incredible." The artisans that perform for Ali's lens have often been accosted by tourists who have little interest in the processes by whom these textiles were made. "Tourists tend to be interested in acquiring items for a bargain and on the way perhaps snap a photo without consent," Ali says, subsequently describing the difference between a tourist and a traveler, "I try to be a traveler... talking, engaging, eating, walking, listening and learning from local people." In fact, Ali does not reveal her camera until after discussing her project with the artisans, with many being more amenable to volunteer when learning that no skin will be shown.

Speaking about the reaction from the artisans being photographed, Ali explains the mutual understanding that the images aim to capture portraits of entire communities, not individuals. "Tribes survive as communal entities," she says, "And there is something extremely beautiful about this that might be hard for Western Europeans or people of the United States to grasp, where people are extremely independent which is great, but also extremely lonely." Ali sees tribal communities as "entire textiles woven together by years of stories and ceremonial histories." She likens these societies to many different threads that are weaved together

through listening and collaboration, two components that were vital to the fabrication of the series.

Ali intends for BORDERLAND to be an on-going series. "The words 'border,' 'home,' 'homeland,' 'threat,' 'ban,' 'wall,' 'displacement' are all too common in contemporary use," she explains, "I don't imagine them disappearing from our vernacular anytime soon." We asked Ali whether media coverage about the UK embracing Brexit or the U.S. enacting the Muslim Ban or building a wall along the Mexican border is causing viewers to receive the work differently. "The work is certainly poignant in the UK and the U.S. at the moment," she explains, "But the topics and themes covered in the series are certainly not new and are relevant to many parts of the world, especially in the places where I photographed." In fact, it could be argued that Ali's images are shedding light on communities where conflicts and struggles remain out of the news.

While she continues to work on the series, she has just released a new body of work called [Laysa] Ana I AM [NOT], which also looks at what unites and divides us all at once, just like borders. In many ways, the images are very similar to those in BORDERLAND, with the figure's identity disguised through a heavy cloak of fabric. But the fabric covering



this figure unravels, revealing an underside that is woven differently to its colourful exterior.

This time the images are self-portraits, in every image it is Ali's face that is hidden beneath the material. The work responds to the statement 'I AM.' "Through this series I investigate the theme in terms of what I am not," explains Ali, "Essentially to label oneself is to willingly cast oneself in a static mould; and yet each day as we respond both to major events and to minute decisions, we recast who we are by discovering what we are not."

Ali asks, who holds the power to create an identity? How can we break through the lens through which another views us? In the portraits, Ali uses woven newspaper to create a barrier between herself and the viewer. "I am both the photographer and the subject, the observed and the observer," she explains. This new body of work questions the fabricated

barriers in society that vilifies the other, borders that remain invisible.

Alia Ali encourages people to confront their prejudices by concealing her figures' identities. By masking their faces with fabric or other means, we are already stopped from creating ideas about them from their exterior visual appearance. We know nothing about them, who they are, what they look like, where they come from. "Perhaps it is better for us to embrace the multiple layers of what creates our complex identities by living on the borders of all what we are, rather than continually struggling with abridged stereotypes imposed by others," she says, "This leaves the question of what do we really know of anyone? Aren't we all enveloped in stereotypes created by the other? The more we allow these labels to seep into our judgment, the more of a boundary we weave between each other, becoming both the victim and the culprit, all at once."●

**Lizzy Vartanian Collier** is a London-based writer with a special interest in contemporary Middle Eastern Art. She has a BA in Art History and an MA in Contemporary Art and Art Theory of Asia and Africa from the School of Oriental and African Studies. She runs the Gallery Girl blog and has written for *After Nyne*, *Artevisite*, *Canvas Magazine*, *Harper's Bazaar Arabia*, *Ibraaz*, *Jdeed Magazine*, *ReOrient*, and *Suitcase Magazine*. Lizzy is also curator of Arab Women Artists Now—AWAN 2018 (London).





Photograph of Shimagh series, digital prints on cotton, 135 x 135 cm (5x), 2014-2015



Born in 1990 in Washington, DC, and currently based in Los Angeles, **Meshal Al-Obaidallah** is from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. His works of conceptual art are an ever-growing series. And they have been exhibited across the Arabian Gulf region, such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE, as well as outside the region, such as the UK and the US. He is a winner of the 4th International Emerging Artist Award that took place in Dubai in 2016. Recently, his Shimagh Series (2014-2015), which currently consists of five works, was acquired by Greenbox Museum in Amsterdam, as part of the museum's permanent on-display collection.

## SHIMAGH

**Meshal Al-Obaidallah**

Al-Obaidallah's body of works explore the notion of art through redesign, blurring the lines between the two. This is achieved by basing works on the mundane everyday objects around which Obaidallah is surrounded that add a sense of familiarity and relatability.

In the Shimagh series, he takes the traditional cotton monochromatic headdress and digitally reprints its traditional designs with vivid, polychromatic hues on silk. In doing so, he makes subtle observations about generational change and similarity in diversity and taste while retaining the garment's traditional structure. This juxtaposition and interstice of difference and transformation creates a subtle commentary on regional stereotypes, gender and socioeconomic inequality, and the political landscape in his home country of Saudi Arabia as well as in the Middle East and its diaspora more broadly.

At the very essence of every artwork is the topic, ranging from social commentary to cultural references. This is the very beginning of Obaidallah's creative process and an inseparable part of the artwork itself. This constructs a vessel for the intended idea to materialize in the physical world, inviting the audience to ponder and decipher the work's origin and nuances.🎨













# HIKAYAT

*Nour Elbery*

These are the rural women of Egypt around whom Elbery grew up. The illustrations tend to have a colorful and vibrant aura which draws the viewer in to absorb the setting of the drawing and read the speech bubbles or calligraphy added to explain the drawing. The speech bubbles or put light on culturally driven traditions and viewpoints that hinder the empowerment of women in Egypt (and the Middle East in general).

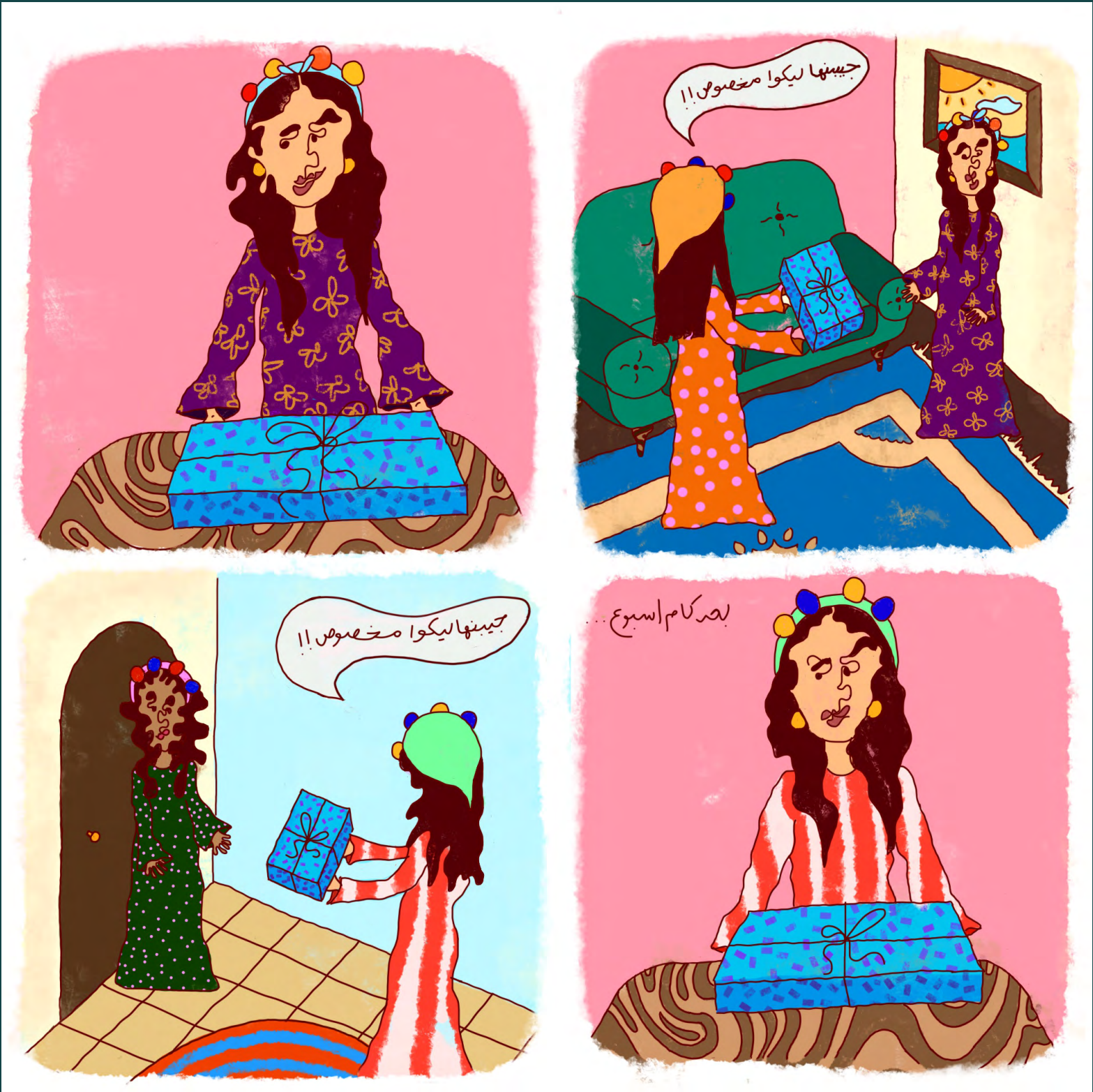
Elbery discusses subjects ranging from the seeming importance for women in the Arab world to marry in contrast to men and to the normal, but unspoken, traditions that families still carry forward. All the characters in Elbery's illustrations are fictional; however, they are inspired by her family home and hometown. She also experiments daily with new subjects and viewpoints that inspire a new light in her, such as in her "Chipseyat Masr" series and her "Kabreet" series. The subjects discussed are all things that the artist has experienced. By drawing about these experiences, Elbery observes and foments a discussion about the societal changes that need to occur into to create a comfortable place for women of the coming generations.🌟

*Nour Elbery* is a 19-year-old Egyptian architecture student at American University of Sharjah (UAE).





Nour Elbery, 3eedeya



Nour Elbery, Hedeya



# US AND THEM

*Celia Shaheen*

Rania Matar's identity, cross-cultural experience, and personal history actively influence her photos, taken in the United States and the Middle East. As a Lebanese-American woman and mother, Matar often bridges the gap between documentary and portrait photography, resulting in images of girls and women that are simultaneously descriptive, powerful, and warm. Moreover, her photographs of female adolescence and womanhood are a compassionate collection of various personal and collective peripheries.

Matar and I spoke—she in Boston, I in Houston—about her 2014-2016 project, *Unspoken Conversations*. In these photographs of middle-aged mothers with their teenage daughters, Matar draws attention to the distances and differences between geography, bodies, and time. By illustrating the universalities and specificities of body language, Matar hopes to reveal the commonalities of “growing up and growing old” across cultures, and how these collective characteristics help us “find beauty in our shared humanity.”

I was fortunate to see Rania Matar's solo exhibition, *In Her Image*, at the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas. *In Her Image: Photographs by Rania Matar* is currently on view at the Cleveland Museum of Art until January 13, 2019.



Rania Matar, *Brigitte and Huguetta* (Ghazir, Lebanon), *Unspoken Conversations* series, 2014



*The following interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.*

**Celia Shaheen:** Did the decision to make *Unspoken Conversations* its own series happen gradually, or can you recall a standalone moment that drove you to start creating this body of work?

Rania Mattar: All my work is autobiographical on some level. I have four kids: two boys and two girls, but the girls have inspired my work in profound ways. My work has been following them as they grow older, and I didn't realize—actually until the Amon Carter show—that my work is one big project about girlhood and womanhood, from pre-puberty until middle age.

Unspoken Conversations started when my older daughter left for college. I realized that my role as a mother was about to change, but also that as my own daughter was leaving home, she was growing up and I was getting older myself—even though, I felt like I was 25!

This work is also very personal to me as I lost my mother when I was three years old; I'm learning the mother/daughter relationship firsthand, so it just turned into a project. I realized all my work had been about these transitions, the teenage years or going through puberty.

**In these photographs, you draw attention to the edges and in-betweens of space, age, and intimacy. There's also an important geographical and cultural aspect to the work as it portrays women from the United States and in Lebanon.**

Yeah, that's important; I literally became a photographer because of that. I was working as an architect, and I actually became a photographer after September 11. Because all that you heard on the news about the Middle East then—and somehow now again—is about terrorism, war, oppression of women, etc. It all made me question my whole sense of identity. Up to that point, I was living like any American; working, having kids, we bought a house. And all of the sudden, this whole rhetoric of “them versus us” made me question my own identity. Who am I? I'm *them* and *us*.

I started wanting to tell that story, and eventually it it became a consistent in my work. For my early work I was only photographing in the Middle East, and the series eventually became a book: *Ordinary Lives*. When I was done with this work, I started a new project that I had envisioned to be in the United States: *A Girl in Her Room*.

I was fascinated by my daughter as she was entering the teenage years and I started a project about girls in their private spaces, where they explore their sense of identity and surround themselves with what matters to them. At some point during the project, I realized I was exactly like those girls a few years back, and that there's such a universality of time and place, about being a teenager.

At that point it became important to me to photograph girls in both my cultures, making the work personal to me and relating it to my bi-cultural identity. It was important to focus on our sameness, our shared humanity and the

Wafa'a and Samira (Bourj El Barajneh Refugee Camp; Beirut, Lebanon), 2016





universality of growing up. It wasn't about whether a girl is veiled or not. Some women in the Middle East wear a headscarf and others don't. In the West, there is a fascination with the veil, but it was not the focus of my work.

**It's a part of who they are.**

Yeah, it's a non-issue. I think there's such a focus on it becoming such an issue that it's important for me to demystify that, and to just stay away from Orientalism. You know, often you see people in the West fascinated with arts from the Middle East, [especially] if it has to do with the veil, or with war—and it's not fair. It's kind of getting old a little bit.

**It is getting old—it's frustrating to see dominant Western views of the Middle East be so flat and monolithic.**

Yeah, it seems exotic, but you know, it's important to show different point of views, so it is a very inherent part of my work. I just came back from Lebanon a few days ago with many rolls of film (I shoot medium format film), and I'm excited to see what's on it. I'm overwhelmed, because I did photograph a lot.

**Regarding the setting of Unspoken Conversations: mirrors, windows, and paintings of women often break up the composition of these photos, creating portals between subjects and space. Do you look for these objects when photographing? How do you see them?**

Well, with the photographs that have paintings in them—there are two I can think of right now. One was very interesting, because it's on top of an empty sofa, and this was a painting of the mother's mother. Ironically, and

sadly, the grandmother died a couple of weeks after we made the photograph; it made it even more poignant for me.

I think Unspoken Conversations is more complex than the other projects in the sense that there are a lot of emotions going on there. But it's also dealing with two people, their relationship to each other, the relationship to me.

Then I found that the use of mirrors added another layer. Often in some of these photos, what you see in the mirror is different than what you're seeing in real life. They're both real, but I'm seeing two different angles at the same time. For the mothers, it's sometimes harder to be photographed—the girls tend to be more comfortable in front of the camera. In addition I am photographing them next to a younger version of themselves—the mirror is also a reminder of that.

The other photograph with a painting that's important is the one where the mother made two paintings of her daughter; one of them is covered with the blue burqa, the other one is in a bathing suit. The family is from two religions, the mother is Muslim and the father is Christian, so the daughter is bi-religious. That being said, you don't see women covered in that manner in Lebanon. The painting was more symbolic. It was representing the teenage years, where you want to hide but also want to expose yourself at the same time. You don't see women dressed like that in Lebanon; it was more symbolic when she did that. When I found that she was the one who painted those, and that they were paintings of the daughter, it became important for me to include them in the photograph.

When I worked on A Girl in Her Room, I was trying to become invisible and quietly observe the girl in her space. It was a quiet collaboration. In Unspoken Conversations it was more complicated as I am observing two people, the relationship between them but also between me. It was a three-way collaboration. There's a fine line where I don't want to over-direct people. There's me observing the body language and the relationship and the way they look at each other, but there's a little bit of me still being in control of the placement.

**What instructions, if any, do you give to mothers and daughters while you photograph them?**

I come with zero preconceptions; I don't work with a tripod or with any lighting. So even though I'm shooting medium format, I move around a little bit and I might realize—[Matar shows me Benedicte and Laetitia, a photograph from Unspoken Conversations]—like this one, for example, all the sudden I was walking and it was almost accidental; I saw what was happening in the mirror, and then I'm like "Ok, can you hold that?" I'm not going to tell them how to hold themselves, so I observe them and let the body language develop slightly. If I'm not seeing the mother, I might ask her to move slightly one way or another. It's a little fluid. I might tell the woman, "Can you look at me?" or maybe, "Don't look at me." I would give that kind of direction. Then I make my selections when I look at images during the editing process. I then see everything with fresh eyes and sometime I just see things that all of the sudden make me think, *Oh my god this is beautiful*.

**On the subject of your subjects, how are you meeting these mothers and**

**daughters? You talk about having no expectations for a shoot when you come into it, but how important it is that you don't know them well?**

With every single one of my projects, I tend to work better with people I don't know. I find that often if you know people, there's a sense of self-consciousness on my part and especially on the women's part, so I like to go in with a clean slate and photograph people I did not previously know. On some level I think they also feel freer and maybe less judged, because there are no preconception from either of us. That being said, I often become good friends and stay in touch with people I photograph—*after* the shoot, after sharing such an intimate and private moment with them.

That was especially true with A Girl in Her Room. Having this anonymity to start with was actually liberating for me and the young woman. And that's still the case now with the work I'm doing. Sometimes I re-photograph somebody I had photographed before, so I do know her, this person—but we kind of just pick up where we left off.

And where do I meet people? Everywhere! I stop people on the street, I stop people in the supermarket; and it seems to work! I realize that, on some level, it's empowering for them to be asked. I give them a lot of credit, especially the mothers in Unspoken Conversations. With the moms, I'm not trying to make them look younger than they are—it's about growing up and growing older and aging. They're being photographed next to the younger version of themselves; age is part of that.

**That's perfect. Some of your projects have taken the form of books; do you see**



**Unspoken Conversations becoming a book, or taking some other form?**

Yes. I was ready to do it this year, but now, I got the Guggenheim Fellowship, and I'm in the process of making new work, and this is where my energy is. It's hard to juggle both. I think when I'm done with this work that I'm shooting now, it would be a good time for me to go back to Unspoken Conversations and edit it. I would have stepped away from it long enough to look at it with fresh eyes and do edits. So I probably will work on the book in about a year. It takes a lot out of you to put a book

**Celia Shaheen** is a mixed Lebanese artist, curator, and student who is currently based in Austin, Texas. Her studio practice sits at the intersection of archiving and making, utilizing materials across the spectrum to investigate and discuss feminist labor and craft, Lebanese culinary traditions, folklore, (an)archival impulses, and affectionate documents.

together, and getting the Guggenheim was so validating that I'm very excited about making new work now. The book will happen in due time.

**I don't blame you; it sounds like it's been really invigorating for you to do this work.**

It's absolutely invigorating, it's validating, I've worked so hard since I received the fellowship, so I feel like I just want to keep doing the work. Ironically, I may be ready for two books at once afterwards! 🤖

Elizabeth and Austin, Boston Massachusetts, 2016



Benedicte and Laeticia, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2014



Soraya and Tala (Yarze, Lebanon), 2014







Randy Goodman, *Women's Taxi (Iran)*, 2015

# LIPSTICK VS AYATOLLAH

*Monica Zandi*

In a country that mandates veiling, Iranian women experience a myriad of constraints placed on them by both the state and society. But despite being denied the right to visibly express creativity or uniqueness, one way Iranian women continue to push for individuality and personhood is by expressing themselves outwardly through chic fashions. In an exhibit at the Bronx Museum entitled *Iran: Women Only*, images of Iranian women are presented from Randy H. Goodman's press and freelance archives that challenges the essentialism pervading the Western image of Iran while generating discourse on the country's culture of gendered resistance.

Goodman's work, both early and later, is that of an outsider pursuing sociological inquiry and newsworthy events. In the 1980s, she captured mostly religious Iranian women belonging to a lower socioeconomic strata supporting the revolution. But in 2015, she captured modern women in everyday situations amidst the backdrop of U.S.-Iran nuclear negotiations (2015). Inside the last two rooms of the exhibit, small and medium format photographs from 2015 show Tehrani women driving cars, laughing in



museums, and wearing makeup. These photos hang alongside press photos from the Hostage Crisis (1979) and Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) that she shot while on assignment for CBS News and *Time Magazine*.

In the newer photos of everyday life, Goodman conducts an ethnographic exploration of the mundane ways in which Iranian women go about their daily lives. Mining her archive some forty years later, Goodman, whose motives are unstated in the actual exhibit, appears to be contrasting these pictures to her earlier photojournalism focused on scenes like mobs of supporters of the revolution which caters to a western audience's stereotypes about veiled Muslim women. In an interview, Goodman noted that the exhibit was originally going to include post-cards and an audio component to provide greater context about the press photos from the 1980s, which at the time were taken to give audiences a view of how empowered and anti-colonial religious Iranian women felt during the Revolution.

The exhibit presents public life during three critical flashpoints in Iran's history: the Hostage Crisis, Iran-Iraq War, and U.S.-Iran nuclear negotiations. Photos from the past and present are juxtaposed with one another to present the viewer with a sense of change, thereby challenging their assumptions and entrenched worldviews about Iran. In *Khomeini Supporter* (1983), an aging Muslim woman in an all-black *chador* (the head-to-toe black veil) stares into Goodman's camera while holding up a picture of Khomeini; next to it, *Exercising* (2015) features a smiling middle aged woman using a park elliptical, while

donning lipstick, a tight unbuttoned beige coat, colorful veil, designer sunglasses, and striped pink sneakers. Both photographs engage with each other and the viewer. The viewer can thus reflect on his or her understanding of Iranian women in observing the stark differences. While the former image may evoke stereotypes about Iranian women as oppressed victims of Islamic patriarchy, the latter demonstrates the subtle ways in which Iranian women have subverted the constraints placed on them. When I conversed with Goodman, she noted that an American spectator from the state of Georgia told her after viewing the exhibit that she "did not know Iranian women were allowed to dress like that and presumed they all wore *burqas*."

Although her early work emerged from a sincere desire to convey the anti-imperialist mood of post-revolution Tehran and understand the ongoing change there, Goodman sold these photographs without any personal input from the subjects, or context for audiences. She admitted this was a stake, noting that she still regrets it nearly forty years later. Herein lies the exhibit's curatorial challenge—*Iran: Women Only* lacks her personal narrative or clues as to her motivation during her early work. This omission lends itself to potential misinterpretation, particularly of the press photographs. Without this context and personal narrative, it is difficult to interpret Goodman's role as a mainstream press photographer and her anti-colonial objectives during the Hostage Crisis. To the viewer, her press photos from the 1980s could easily bleed into familiar visual vocabularies about Iran that evoke the 'terrorist,' 'Other,' 'radical,' and a 'backwards' society.

Young Girl (Iran), 2015



Friday Prayer (Iran), 2015





Goodman states her photographs were snapshots of newsworthy events (e.g., protests, demonstrations, prayer services) meant to show Iran's political shift in the early 1980s. Her exhibit, she notes, is not intended to be viewed as an "art show" but rather as documents from Iran's past and present historical canons. While she did not intend to create mediated narrative, the exhibit does not clarify these intentions, potentially leaving audiences confused as to how these images should be interpreted alongside the more recent photos in the exhibit.

These newer photos are the result of Goodman's 2015 return to Iran. On this trip, she had no media backing or publication goals; but sought to produce new images featuring Iranian people in dialogue with her press photos. Goodman unequivocally demonstrates how Iran's political atmosphere is different now through the exhibit's dialogical and pedagogical register. By using women as evidence of Iran's change, her exhibit tackles issues pertaining to them such as stereotypes about Muslim identity and compulsory veiling. In the 2015 images, the audience gains a greater sense of liberation felt yet in the 1980s images—lost due to lack of context. When one sees a chador-clad Muslim woman in a black and white photograph from a religious demonstration supporting Ayatollah Khomeini, the meaning of her presence is transmuted; in that moment, she was empowered, but forty years later, she is perceived as 'oppressed' or 'radical' by western audiences.

The positioning in Goodman's freelance pictures from 2015 to press photos from CBS, *Time Magazine*, and Gamma Liaison conjures mainstream media's habit of generating mediated visuals;

where photographs are utilized by media institutions to fit a particular narrative or ideology. The press photos represent Iran's history through the lens of geopolitical developments seen on popular television and front papers. While taken for historical documentation, Goodman's press photos nevertheless evoke familiar graphics, ingrained in our collective memory since the Hostage Crisis. In *Women's Day Demonstration with Posters* (1983) and *Women's Day March* (1983), both photos feature hordes of black-clad, faceless, Iranian women holding posters of Khomeini. Again, the exhibit does not provide much context about these women or the moment they occupy—let alone any clear language, feminist or anti-colonial, in a way that breaks stereotypes about Iran while also highlighting how news organizations perceived these images through Western Eurocentric paradigms to prove an essential difference between Iran and the West, perpetuate Orientalist tropes, and further damage Iran's identity as a result of the Hostage Crisis.

However, while the exhibit does not address how mainstream Western society 'Othered' and subordinated the chador-clad women of the 80s after their stories entered the canon, we see an attempt to counter Iran's mediated treatment in the news with the newer series. In *Women's Taxi* (2015) and *Tehran Bazaar* (2015), for instance, Iranian women appear exercising greater degrees of agency. Here, the subjects are active compared to their passive counterparts in Goodman's press photographs, where the chador-clad women appear as having only an "Islamic" identity. When Khomeini rose to power, he used religion and state control to impose a conservative Islamic proscriptions of female identity

on Iranian women. All traces of makeup or "Western" style clothing disappeared from public life. Over the years, women seeking such images would need to resort to illegal means such as satellite television and social media. Thus, by wearing make-up and showing strands of hair, the women in Goodman's photos challenge both the official Iranian state-mandated female identity as well as Western assumptions that Iranian women are silent victims. *Women's Taxi* shows a middle-aged woman, smiling proudly as she drives a women-only taxi cab, wearing makeup and a loose veil exposing locks of hair stiff from hair spray. Next to it, *Tehran Bazaar* shows a trio of Iranian women shopping for colorful accessories, wearing loose veils and colorful blue coats, sporting cosmetic surgeries. These images reveal women subtly opposing the regime's mandate on veiling and expectations for women.

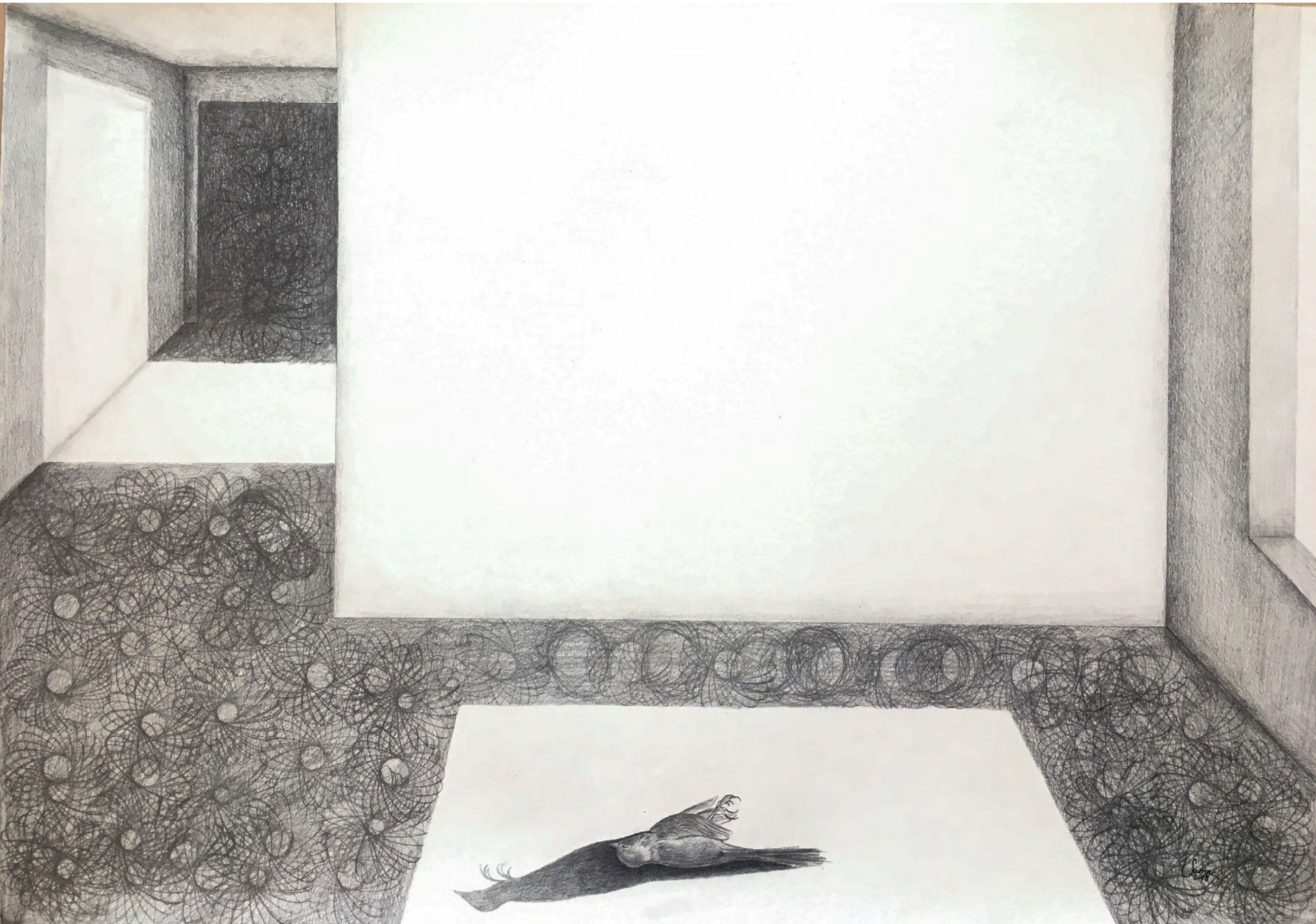
While the exhibit goes some distance in introducing nuance to the portrayal of Iranian women, there is room for a deeper exploration of western photojournalism's impact on how iconic images inform the audience's political awareness and cement stereotypes. Goodman could benefit from conceptually or didactically

providing the audience with more personal knowledge about her travels to Iran, opinions on journalism, and how she developed her images. Further, while the exhibit picks up visual symbols of Iranian women's resistance, e.g., colorful veils and makeup, it does not delve further into how, why, and what historical triggers or social forces made way for this resistance. Deeper dialogue with the subjects is also absent—what is the female taxi driver's story? What about the exercising woman? These questions and gaps highlight what seems missing in an exhibit highlighting the agency of Iranian women: the participation, consultation, or inclusion on some level of Iranian artists or photojournalists. Goodman's role as an American photojournalist in Iran on one hand wanted to present historical documents and newsworthy events from anti-imperial, empowered women in the 1980s. On the other hand, selling such images without her voice is an important tension related to the discourse about women in Iran in mainstream media. But in order to artfully navigate the nuances of Iranian identity, *Iran: Women Only*, would benefit from featuring the inclusion of creators closer to the subject—Iranians—in future reiterations. ●

**Monica Zandi** is a writer, educator, and artist by way of Iran. She has written for Sublet Projects, Kaltblut Magazine, and Feminist Wednesdays on a range of topics such as art from the 18th century and collage from local Brooklyn artists. Her current focus is on analyzing the impact of hyper-reality on contemporary Iranian feminist thinking and art.



Sama Shahroui, *The Artist's Bedroom*, 2018, pencil on paper, 42 cm x 59 cm



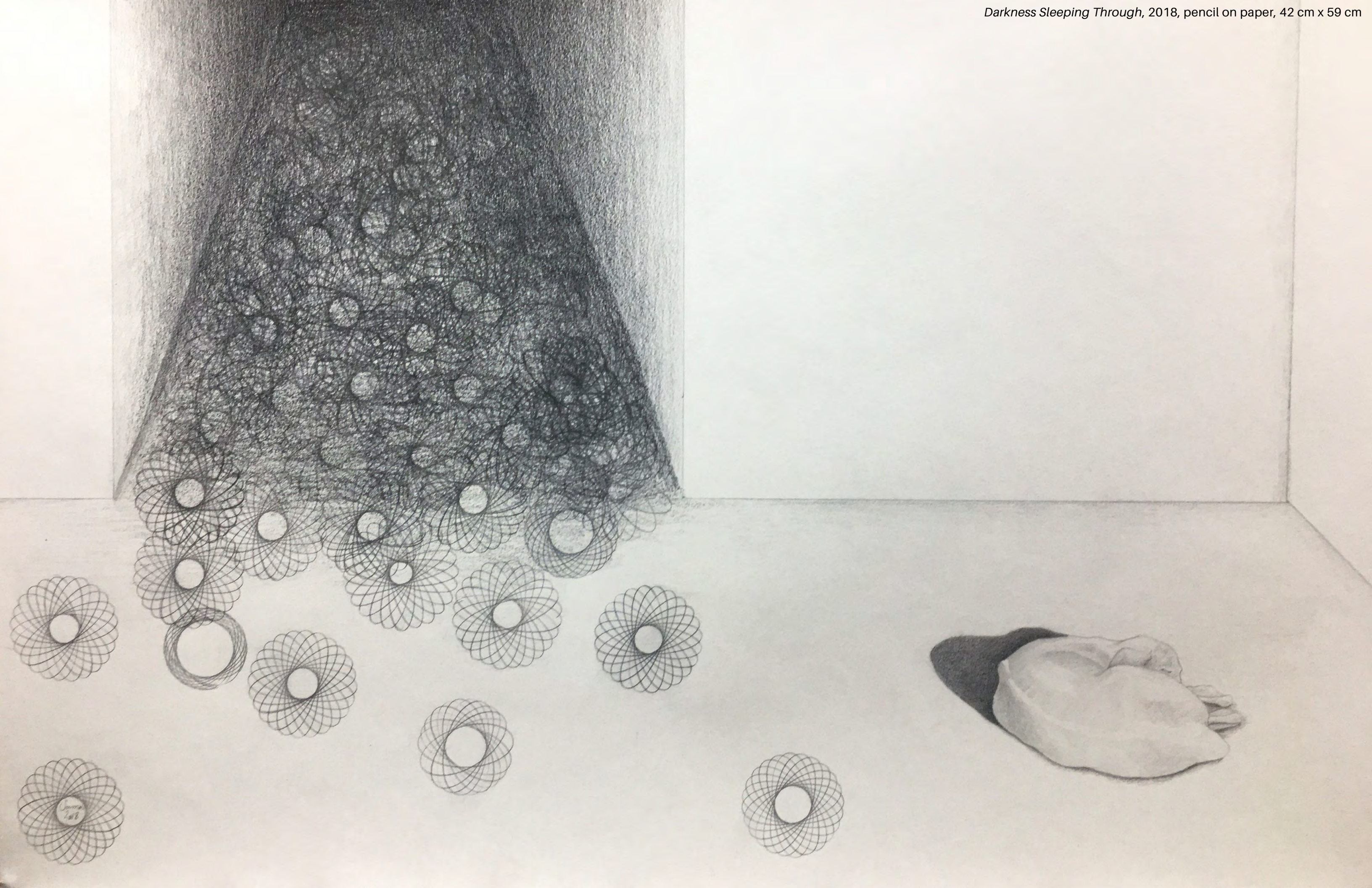
## WHAT HAPPENS NOW?

*Sama Shahroui*

Shahroui's latest series focused on displacement. Man-made interiors are inhabited by motionless animals. Their unusual presence in the environment indicates their acquisition of the space. They are seen as calm and in a state of deep sleep, seemingly unaware of the peculiar elements that slowly invade the area in the form of geometric stars. The clutter of texture and color inside the pattern contrasts with the clear and plain surfaces of the surrounding walls. And as white light enters, the sleeping animals are given a hopeless warning of an impending attack. 🌑

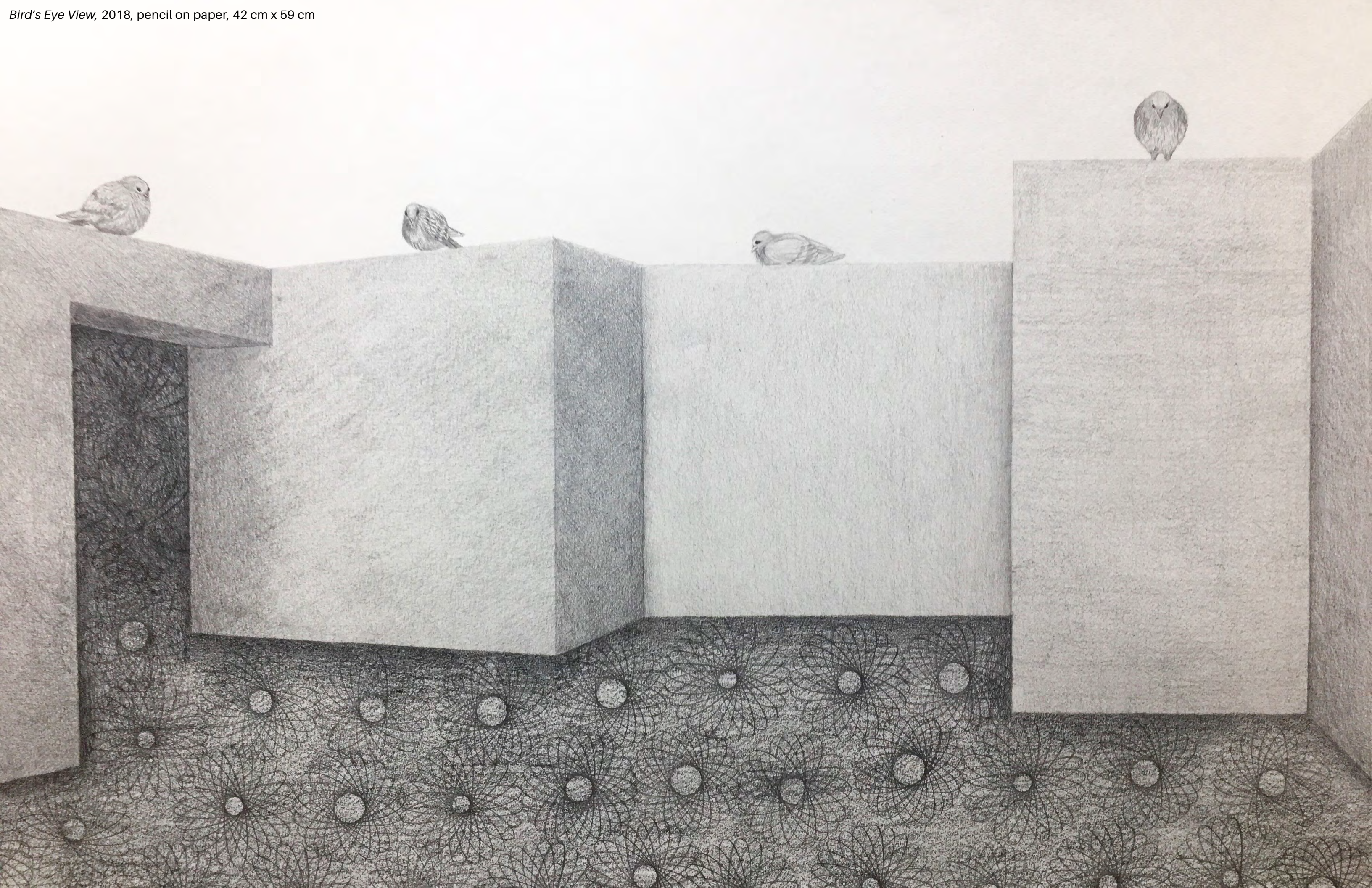
**Sama Shahroui** was born in Amman, Jordan (1994), and experiments with the contrasts relating to childhood memory and the human condition, trying to find the grey areas in between.







*Bird's Eye View*, 2018, pencil on paper, 42 cm x 59 cm





# FOREIGN LANDSCAPES

*Tamer El Aswad*

Using photography and digital manipulation to create dream-like worlds, Tamer El Aswad's artworks are projections of his inner self. Each landscape is an expression of differing perceptions of reality - living between two worlds of light and dark. Each world holds a floating rock formation, akin to Aswad's fascination with textures from nature such as rock, wood, water. This rock-like object is a directionless form that signifies liquidity and solidity at the same time; floating in an attempt to seek silence from the complexities of one's mind, of beliefs, ideologies, and passing daily thoughts.

Foreign Landscapes creates a frigid illusion of time and space, an expression of Aswad's momentary perception of life in black and white. These manifestations of reality, which differ from person to person, are attempts to understand and analyze the act of being human. In humanity, one accepts that life is a constant journey of discovery. Aswad believes that we never truly know ourselves, no matter how many books we read, films we watch, ideologies we follow, religions we pray for. He asks, "Should one find the light, or should one experience darkness in order to find truth?" 🌑

In 1987, **Tamer El Aswad** was born in Amman, Jordan, where he received his B.Sc in Maintenance Engineering from the German Jordanian University in 2011. Aswad currently works as a videographer, photographer, designer, and editor at Izif.com, an online music school for the Arab World.

Tamer El Aswad, Exposure, Foreign Landscapes series, digital collage









# NO-MAN'S LAND

*Lina Fansa*

Well, I'm in no-man's land, and without a man. On the road to my parents' house this time—Damascus, the obscure place of an older generation—and I'm taking the kids on a journey to 1960.

Cool Lebanese radio plays songs so dull and old that even the Prophet (PBUH) wouldn't know the lyrics. "Rock Me Baby" has faded out into a bad signal and some jumbled words. The static reminder of ancient Syrian boredom begins to pop in and out of the atmosphere; a mosquito's electrocuting death sentence in a light zapper.

"We are now driving through no-man's land," I tell them.

"Is this where we're going? Is that the name of this country?" the little one asks.

I explain to her that these lands belong to no one, and watch her puzzled face turn into a curious one as she floats back into her daydream. She's young but if there's anything she understands, it's neutrality. Her ADD puts her back to sleep, oblivious to the sounds of the expired AC from 1983 wheezing like strong winds through a smoker's lungs.

They must learn... It must be easier now, away from their Disney channel, Shakira albums, and French dolls. They'll discover how it feels to walk on a street and be asked, "How are you?" by people who actually mean it. I can already see them frustratingly search the TV for English channels. They'll be taught how to read books (including the Holy Book!) and think about the unseen, the dead. What it means to grow old in a generation that never had time to be a child.



Photograph by Hana Kudsi, *Untitled*, 1999



Soon, they'll discover the faded Dumbo elephant stickers on the bed. And I'll tell them that I left Damascus after the day I was born. The house has not changed (or been cleaned) ever since. Their grandfather crossed this very same highway in reverse to go look for work after losing his job to nationalization measures in 1964. They'll learn that, for the last six decades, these borders have been crossed and re-crossed with the strongest vitality and urge to live in a sort of musical peace. Same tones, different notes.

I'm dreaming of the sea, missing it with every piece of condensed humidity from the city that moves away from me. My hair is softer and my lips a little dustier, my accent has slowly changed back.

Our friendly taxi driver Abu Ahmad, whose heavy breathing seems to annoy my eldest, tells stories in his raspy voice about different ways to bribe officers at the border. He boasts that he is the man for the job—been doing it for years—since he knows everything there is to know about this border. He is, however, going to keep a look out for any new faces. According to Abu Ahmad, those ones are the “sons of mentally challenged donkeys” and he believes in “God’s will to wipe that sort of species off the face of the earth.”

They're all the same, if he asks me...

**Lina Fansa** migrated like birds, between different cultures, 'United' places and Saudi, to touch base with *koussa ma7shi* in Beirut city. Got a visual degree from AUB to see life a bit differently. Currently, with a 9 to 5 job in the Khaleej, in the music industry; as well as other fun cities that are a little more free. Lina thinks the Middle East could use a little comedy, even though her writing is mainly about heartbreaks and tragedy. One day she hopes, but until then we will wait and see.

I'm not afraid but my palms sweat lightly as we approach the check-point. I can already taste the aroma of photocopied ink. The uniformed guards are getting heavier, kneeling on one leg and licking their chubby fingers as they turn the pages of documents.

Pictures of the man now appear in no-man's land. The kids bend their necks to get a better view of this imaginary border. There is nothing but primary colours, and crispy clean skies.

My heart beats deeper as I see more of the pictures. Man with family. Man with man. Man standing alone. We are just the three blind mice sitting here and watching, smart, but helpless little mice, caught on a superglue trap. Not alive nor dead, just stuck.

I flash them my stern look and they respond mockingly, since it's almost identical to the expression on all the posters. The kids straighten up as I pull out the passports. They know this means business, because I represent them as I always have. Who else would, but a man? That's what we are told over and over again.

My heart belongs to no-man's land,  
But the future is all in their hands.

I hope one day they'll understand. ☺

## HYPOTHETICAL BODY EQUATION (WITH CATS)

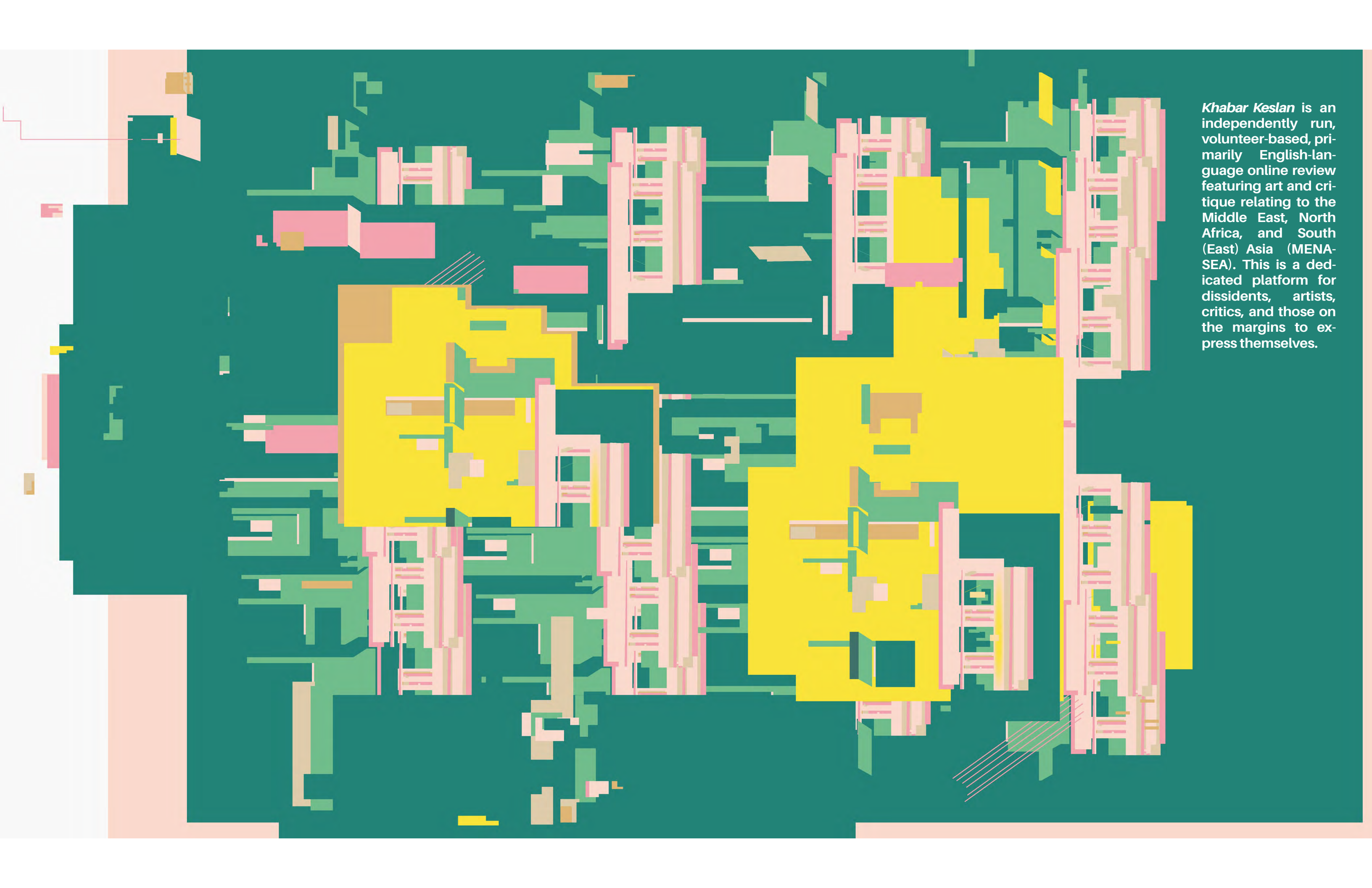
**Nour Kamel**

So they make me fall in love with what I could never love whole. What mascara do you use? You have beautiful eyelashes *masha2allah*. Compliments praising gods work and not you. I want to be the extremes of myself and dress in drag. King. Queen. A boat. where. is the line. though where can I be the utmost of myself if not on public transportation. To and fro to and fro, the ashes had me at don't mind the gap. I try not to burn up too soon and fall. Feel parts of me have, scooping imaginary limbs I had briefly before forgetting forever.

So I went and made you, because everything where I was was too much. I gathered the drek, discarded cat bones, everything that had a hole in it that couldn't be mended. Loose drippings from the pan. I turned everything unwanted my chest could expand to breath in into you. I named you Home and called you Beaut. Now the drek has turned the alive of green, the cats know where their bones are buried, and patchwork isn't something the poor do mama to hide their bodies. I'd let you light the world when it got darkest but sometimes you say the stupidest shit and you won't let me bring anymore cats Home.

So I named my body Come, and I'll let it call what it needs. ☺



An abstract geometric composition featuring a large teal background. Overlaid on this are various shapes in bright yellow, light pink, and muted green. These shapes include rectangles, squares, and irregular polygons, some of which are layered on top of each other, creating a sense of depth. Some shapes have thin white outlines. The overall effect is a complex, layered pattern of geometric forms.

*Khabar Keslan* is an independently run, volunteer-based, primarily English-language online review featuring art and critique relating to the Middle East, North Africa, and South (East) Asia (MENA-SEA). This is a dedicated platform for dissidents, artists, critics, and those on the margins to express themselves.



